

interzone

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Special Australian WorldCon issue:

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Peter Friend

Ivan Jurisevic

Catherine S. McMullen

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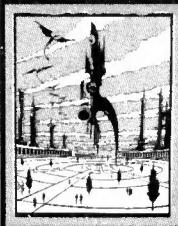
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interzone

science fiction & fantasy

AUGUST 1999

Number 146

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Everyone's experience is different. When my brother, newly wed, emigrated to Australia in 1975, I couldn't understand how anyone could want to leave England. And then me Mum went to visit, and, two years later, went to join him permanently; and her *de facto* followed as soon as she could legally sponsor him, leaving me all alone on Blighty's blessed shore.

The beer here is better. The television is far better. And the weather is definitely cooler, at least cooler than Brisbane where my family has settled. And, no, I am not a whinging pom; I stayed put in England, where I felt I was better off. But when the price of air fares dropped and I could afford it, I did go to visit. I took my wife to meet my family. While upside down, we have tried to see a bit of the other bits of Oz, and last time, we got to Melbourne and, through *Interzone*, met Sean McMullen and some other lovely people, and were made to feel very welcome.

Of course, my awareness of Australia goes back a long way. Before we had a television, there was the laconic humour of Dick Bentley, and Bill Kerr in *The Flying Doctor* on the radio as well.

Then there was *They're a Weird Mob*. This is a film of the book of the same name by Nino Culotta that tells the story of an Italian immigrant to Australia and how he gets by after the job that brought him to Sydney disappears. *They're a Weird Mob* lay forgotten at the bottom of my mind until my first visit to Australia, when my brother took me to a re-stumping party in the Brisbane Queenslander house of one of his friends. In the film, Nino becomes a builder's labourer, and ends up marrying the daughter of a prosperous builder and building his own house, but not before he has attended many such parties where the beer is free and the job is to clear the mulga.

The problem here, as with any set of characteristics, is that they tend to become clichés that obscure real differences to the casual observer. My delight in the company of Australians is seeing how, even as they manifest their stereotypical clichés, within, around and finally overwhelming that, they are unique, interesting, human beings.

Australian fiction, similarly, is no more than a manifestation of the human spirit in adversity, and as such is wholly a part of the great human effort of making sense of our world by the use of fiction. It nevertheless has its

EXPERIENCING TERRA AUSTRALIS

own characteristics that mark it out as Australian. Science fiction, too, is a part of the fictive whole, but equally distinct in its own way. So it can hardly be surprising if some commentators identify a beast at the conjunction of these two called "Australian Science Fiction." The difficulty here, as with defining sf itself, is that there can be no definition of Australian Science Fiction; all we can do is point to family characteristics and use them as a basis for examination.

The reason I wanted to edit this special theme issue of *Interzone* was not, then, to define Australian sf, but rather to celebrate it. To that end, I asked various authors with Australian connections I was in touch with for stories with a specific Australian character. The first fruit was "Bug" from Jon Courtenay Grimwood, included with his interview in *IZ144*. Geoff Ryman was not able to contribute due to pressure of other work, but one of his grandfathers was Australian, and I live in hope that he will write his Australian story for me one day. Next, Sean McMullen and Kate Orman delivered superb stories, and their very different efforts are included here. Terry Dowling had just submitted "The View from Nancy's Window," and Steve Paulsen, whom I had also met in Melbourne, offered to interview Terry for the issue.

In the process of proofing Sean's story via e-mail, he mentioned that his daughter was writing fiction, so I asked to see it, and was so impressed

that I had to include "Teddy Cat" here to show what the next generation can do. (Is this also a first for *Interzone* – father and daughter both with fiction in the same issue?). Then we trawled through the slush pile for stories with Australian addresses, and the other stories here all come from there (there are stories that didn't make it due to space limitations, but which I hope we will publish soon). Finally, the review section leads off with Tom Arden, an Australian novelist resident in Brighton, looking at some recent fiction from other Australian authors.

A special mention here must go to Peter Friend's story "Stormy Weather." Peter lives in New Zealand, so doesn't count as an Australian – any more than Grimwood or Ryman do. I make no apologies. I wanted stories that conveyed an essential Australian character; Peter's story fits, and not only because the glon reminds me so perfectly of my brother with his permaculture garden in Brisbane.

My only regret is that Greg Egan is not present. I have no dispute with his point-of-view that Australian science fiction is just a part of world sf, and that there is no "Miracle Ingredient A" that makes it uniquely saleable. However, just as Australians are instantly recognizable by their accents, so there is an identifiable difference that is equally attractive in their fiction. Terry Dowling describes in his interview the oddness of having 18 million people inhabiting an entire continent, and considers the subconscious effect this might have on the creative processes. Certainly, when I first saw Australia, it was ineffably, indescribably different from anything else in my experience, and that impression has not gone away. I get the distinct feeling that if we ever do manage to colonize other planets, they will end up very much like Australia, with highly-developed conurbations sprinkled lightly over a

thoroughly alien and hostile landscape. As such, Australia is science fiction in action. I am glad to have been able to experience it and grateful to all those wonderful people who made it possible, and I hope that with this selection of stories I have managed to share some of that experience.

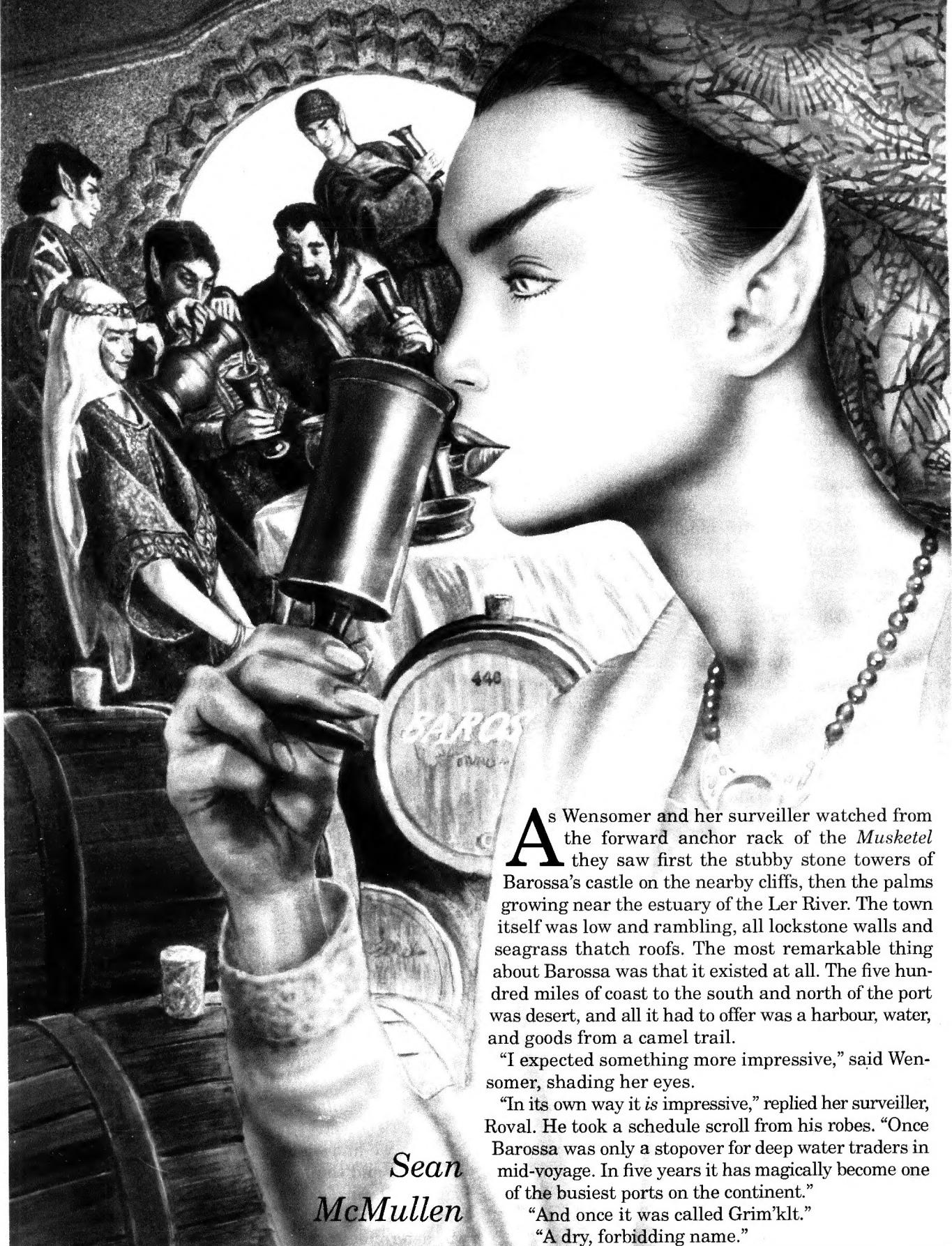
Paul Brazier



Left: the reason this issue exists – my family on the verandah of me Mum's Queenslander in Brisbane, January 1998.

Back row, left to right: Aziz Dinnar, Juliet Eyeions, Paul Brazier. Front, left to right: my brother, John 'the glon' Lewis and my mum, Enid Lewis, without whom none of this etc...

NEW WORDS OF POWER



Sean
McMullen

As Wensomer and her surveiller watched from the forward anchor rack of the *Musketeer* they saw first the stubby stone towers of Barossa's castle on the nearby cliffs, then the palms growing near the estuary of the Ler River. The town itself was low and rambling, all lockstone walls and seagrass thatch roofs. The most remarkable thing about Barossa was that it existed at all. The five hundred miles of coast to the south and north of the port was desert, and all it had to offer was a harbour, water, and goods from a camel trail.

"I expected something more impressive," said Wensomer, shading her eyes.

"In its own way it is impressive," replied her surveiller, Roval. He took a schedule scroll from his robes. "Once Barossa was only a stopover for deep water traders in mid-voyage. In five years it has magically become one of the busiest ports on the continent."

"And once it was called Grim'klt."

"A dry, forbidding name."

"But 'Barossa' is lush, inviting: a fertile name, learned inquisitor."

"I do believe our search is at an end, fellow inquisitor."

Wine bearing Barossa's trademark was having an impact, everywhere: from the tundra of Southern Scalticar to the Westgate Straits and the Occidar Sea. Barbarians offered plundered gold in bulging purses to buy the wines of Barossa, while the masters of strange, squat ships with single masts from semi-legendary Charten-yir bid against them with boxes of inscribed silver coils. Herein was the mystery. Barossa grew no vines, pressed no grapes and aged no vintages. All its wines came over the desert by camel from the vineyards and presses of the cool, lush inland plateaus and mountains on the equator. Central Acrema also exported the same wine east to Bantok and north to Darusic, but for some reason it was only the wine that passed through Barossa that commanded high prices.

The *Musketel* nosed into the harbour and dropped anchor among the vessels awaiting a turn at one of the stone piers. The colourful tents of the camel caravaneers were visible behind the low buildings of the docks, and the entire port seemed enmeshed in scaffolding for repairs, extensions and new buildings. Even the castle featured a partially built new tower.

Horrgh was a barbarian slaver from so far south that his homeland was not on any maps. Normally Barossans did not deal in slaves, but occasionally some of the more humane rulers of distant kingdoms or tribes would, when faced with dissent, rebellion or annoying family members, sell the offenders into slavery in the most remote and isolated market conceivable. Nine times out of ten this was Barossa.

"Hate place," he grunted to the little wine merchant who sat at his table in the *Stone Traveller*. "No beer, no sing, no fight. Whores skinny and weather hot."

"Ah, but this is the wine capital of the world," said the merchant effusively.

"Hate wine," rumbled the barbarian. "Women drink wine. Soft, pale slaves drink wine. Warriors drink beer."

"But sir, I drink wine."

"You want I repeat?"

"I see that you drink mead," said the merchant, taking no offence. "Mead from the McLaren Valley in central Acrema. A fine beverage."

"Need drinking. Barossa hot, like baker oven."

"Have you tried wine of the Scrangri variety?"

"Wine weak, sour. Horse piss."

"Oh I agree, Dervian chardonnay is like that." He winked knowingly. "That's why real men drink Scrangri."

"Huh? Wine is wine!"

"Oh no, Scrangri is not like that Dervian sugarwater. You see how small my goblet is? I don't have a fraction of your strength, so I can drink only the smallest amount of Scrangri."

By now the barbarian was not a little intrigued, and was feeling vaguely flattered. He slammed a fist down on the table and demanded Scrangri when the vintner appeared. The man hurried away, then returned with a jar and a demi-goblet which he set down in front of Horrgh.

"What is?" demanded the huge man, pointing at the demi-goblet.

"A demi-goblet, sir –"

"Frown 'way!" he bellowed, seizing the demi-goblet in one hand and the vintner in the other and flinging them both over a stack of empty barrels. He snapped the neck from the sealed jar, tilted his head back and swallowed.

Horrgh had intended to drain the contents and fling the empty jar after the vintner. This was perfectly reasonable behaviour as far as he was concerned; after all he had not had a good brawl in four months. Scrangri was, however, made from a particularly robust variety of shiraz grape, and after treading the red skins had been squeezed in a calico twist-press for every last ounce of bitterness. The resin from the barrels that had confined it for the year past joined forces with cheap pepper from Ulkhas and cheaper chili paste from Contarbri.

Horrgh gulped several mouthfuls, almost gagged, tried to swallow what was in his mouth, failed, fell to his knees as he pushed the table over, then discharged the remaining Scrangri through his nostrils. After some moments he forced his mouth open and took a great gasp of air. Some of the other drinkers began to applaud nervously. The little merchant crawled from under the overturned table.

"Remarkable!" he exclaimed. "No man has ever drunk so much Scrangri at once."

"And lived," muttered the vintner.

"Has body," Horrgh panted. "Like wives."

"Would you like a couple of sample jars to cheer your voyage home?" the merchant asked.

The barbarian coughed again and shook his head.

"Samples? Pox take samples. Want barrels!"

Wensomer and Roval had been watching with interest.

"What do you think?" asked Wensomer.

"I tried Scrangri once," Roval replied, shuddering. "I thought my host had poisoned me."

"Yet that greasy dire-bear is paying gold for a shipload of it."

"And calling for another jar! Gah, I can't watch."

It took Horrgh another half hour to drink the second jar, aided by his new friend. Presently the barbarian stood up, belched, and made for the privy. The merchant wrote something on a slate and dispatched his clerk with the gold from the transaction. Suddenly there was a bellow of surprise and pain from the privy. The patrons of the *Stone Traveller* exchanged knowing looks. Horrgh emerged from the privy clutching his groin, shuffled to his bench and sat down slowly.

"Sharper going out than going in," he gasped, his face ashen.

The merchant leaned over and whispered something in his ear.

"True?" exclaimed Horrgh.

"Aye, 'tis a fact."

"Then we find women! Now!"

Horrgh and the merchant were not hard to keep in sight as they made their way to the red lantern area. The barbarian apparently found walking uncomfortable, but was determined to test some other attribute of Scrangri.

"Ebonaric pepper from Ulkhas and Hellbreath chili seed paste from Contarbri are said to be in Scrangri," Wensomer told Roval as they walked. "The essences are excreted quickly."

"In pee, rather obviously."

"In *all* bodily fluids. Sweat, tears, spittle... and semen."

"Praise the Gods of all Moonworlds that I spat out my first mouthful."

"You are missing the point. That lumbering axe-murderer will literally give burning kisses. After sexual congress – if he can now manage it – his partner will be left with a glowing sensation. The effect is reported to be vaguely pleasant."

Roval rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "So, Scrangri can really make one burn with desire."

"Yes, but it's nothing new. The medicar witches of Sargol dispense a paste that you can rub on the shaft of your –"

"Can, perhaps, *wish to*, definitely not!" declared Roval firmly.

The merchant and barbarian assessed several establishments, speaking with the girls at the doors before making a choice. As Wensomer waited in the shadows she made some adjustments to her clothing, and soon seemed to be dressed similarly to Roval. The merchant emerged after about a half hour, but had not gone far when he found himself in an empty street, bracketed by two dark figures whose blades glinted in the green light from the mighty ringed Verdenne.

"I carry no gold," he said, unlacing his purse and holding it high, "but you are welcome to my float of silver."

"We want no coins," said Wensomer in the lowest contralto that she could manage. "Just... consultancy, I believe is the new word."

The merchant's name was Cassion, and he was puzzled but forthcoming about the rapid change in fortune of Barossa.

"Five years ago I gathered seagrass along the shore and sold it for thatch, camel feed and packing jars in ships. Now I have five sub-contractors working for me, and have diversified into marketing. Most wine merchants here vend the finer wines, but as everyone knows, price cutting wars benefit nobody. Thus I looked for a market segment that could not be easily copied – at least not before I had locked in my suppliers and clients."

"Scrangri," said Roval.

"Aye. The great merchant houses have their alchemists hard at work trying to duplicate my original blonde of added herbs and spices –"

"Pepper and chillis," interjected Wensomer.

The merchant fell silent for a moment, looking uneasily at his two captors.

"I see, you want the secret of the blonde, but I do not have it. My chief alchemist and his assistants are the custodians of Scrangri's fire –"

"Which does not interest us," snapped Wensomer. "If you want to get rich by poisoning overgrown privy mops like Horrgh, then do so with our blessing. We want the source of certain words of power that have spread to the ports of all known continents in just five years. Who is

teaching those words?"

"Words of power? I don't understand –"

"Cassion, my colleague is carrying a jar of Scrangri and a funnel..."

She let the words hang.

"But *they* will kill me –"

"That's all the more incentive for you to remain silent about *us* to *them*. I believe that what we are offering you is termed a win-win scenario in Barossa's new language of power."

Cassion glanced up and down the street, then whispered "The visirene."

They left Cassion and returned to the *Stone Traveller*, which was one of the original five inns dating from before the boom that had transformed Barossa. There were now thirty seven inns ranging from pole and tent-cloth shelters to three storey stone establishments for more affluent patrons. The innkeeper, Hefnix, had replaced his thatch roof with ship's decking, covered it with a pergola hung with blue and red striped sailcloth, added a half dozen young palm trees in cut-down barrels, and called it a wine garden. He was expounding on his other renovations as he showed Wensomer her room.

"Good, clean room, wi' barred window, slatted shutters, and an ante-chamber for yer surveiller."

"But I have to pass through it to reach the outer door."

"Aye, and so does any unwelcome visitors in search of yer purse or pleasure, Ladyship. Thought of it meself. It's versy-tile infrastructure."

"It's what?"

"Well..." Hefnix began awkwardly. "It's like most merchants are men, but some are ladies and all ladies has surveillers. Now some ladies – and I'm not suggestin' ye be one of them – like to have their surveillers, ah, do the work of a husband, if ye catch my meaning."

"I do, and I shall be keeping the inner door barred, I do assure you."

"Oh, aye, aye. What happens behind t'outer door concerns me nowt."

Wensomer sniffed and began counting out coins.

"Something else puzzles me," she said. "By your main door are stairs leading to the roof, yet the sign above them says 'Wine Garden.' What sort of garden is on a roof?"

"Hah, it's to catch sea breezes," Hefnix explained. "Those what appreciates fine wine likes ambee-yence for drinking – but ye'd know that, o'course. The dealers in fine wines can enjoy a cool breeze and nice view. Why there's a vista over the harbour and ye can see the cliffs and castle. Some folk spend all afternoon sippin' and talkin' up there."

"So business is good?" asked Wensomer.

"Too good, can't keep staff. No sooner does I open the extension than the Vintner's Guild awards me Inn of the Month and everyone wants my serving maids 'cause they got experience in a wine garden – mine! I mean, like I had to buy three slave girls from Horrgh, but they takes time to train, and to learn the languages."

"Ah yes, but as the visirene says, it locks in your support staff while giving you a competitive advantage that your rivals cannot easily copy."

Hefnix blinked. "Not sure I follows," he said cautiously. "Well there could be a price war among the innkeepers, as they bid ever higher for free wine garden serving maids. Your slaves' costs remain fixed, in spite of a heavy initial outlay."

Hefnix nodded, then left. With the outer door locked, Wensomer and Roval sat on her bed scratching messages on a slate in silence.

"Did you see the way he froze when I mentioned the visirene?"

"It was more eloquent than his words," agreed Roval. "So Cassion spoke the truth."

"Some of it."

Wensomer yawned and stretched, then indicated the door with her toe.

"You had better repair to the surveiller's chamber," she purred. "People might talk."

"About what?" asked Roval as he stood up.

As the afternoon shadows of the next day were lengthening, Roval and Wensomer walked the half mile up the hill to the castle for their appointment with King Selva. Wensomer was reading aloud from a briefing scroll.

"Selva's grandfather was a pirate who attacked and conquered Barossa about fifty years ago. His ship was destroyed in the fighting, so he made the townsfolk repair an old fortress on the cliffs, called it his castle and declared himself king of the port and all deserts and beaches within a day's walk.

"Recent growth in Barossa's population has caused it to lose its status as the smallest kingdom in the known world. Two years ago Selva, 'outsourced' the defence of his realm to the caravan guards by forming a 'strategic alliance' with eleven caravan masters during a winter market convergence. They then conquered five tollway forts along the main route as they returned inland, using sailors 'sub-contracted' from visiting ships to scale the walls with boarding grapples. King Selva abolished tollway charges."

"Incredible. And all with other people's warriors, weapons, camels and money."

"He said he was 'eliminating non-productive components upstream on the value chain.'"

"Any mention of the visirene?"

"When this was written the king had a cook, a footman, a laundress, five guards and a multi-skilled chamber maid who appears to have done some contract work by bearing him an heir. The captain of his guards was also the tax collector. Now he has seventy staff and servants on his pay slate, not counting the artisans building extensions to his castle."

Wensomer carried a letter that introduced her as a wine merchant's sister from Scalticar. They were met at the gates by a hospitalier who offered them cool, damp towels and took their suncloaks, then announced them to King Selva. Selva was a tall, well groomed and olive-skinned man in red silk deck-britics and open waist-coat. He was also a very affable host and took them on a tour of the castle that ended in the tasting room.

"First you must try the Jervial 14 Riesling," Selva suggested as a smartly dressed servant uncorked a jar.

"Light and refreshing, but with the sweetness of fruit rather than sugar."

Wensomer and he clanged goblets. Roval stood by, watching. Across the room was Selva's visirene, who wore auditor's robes and was noting down the choices and orders. Even the king deferred to her.

"Exquisite," Wensomer pronounced as she swirled the liquid and sniffed the bouquet. She sipped. "Yes, I do agree about the sweetness. Still, it is perhaps too refined and light for somewhere as cold as Scalticar."

"Ah, indeed, but you may market it as a wine for summer. You see? 'Wines for all seasons,' that is what we say in Barossa. Now next is a Jervial Has 12 Cabernet Sauvignon."

"Now is Jervial the current emperor of the Varanus Highlands where the grapes are grown?" asked Wensomer as she was given a fresh goblet.

"Alas, no longer. His son, Jervial Tay, took the throne two years ago. I shall bring out a Jervial Tay 1 Chardonnay later. A brisk, cheeky little white, just the thing to go with fish on a hot day."

Wensomer did, in fact, have an account to buy several cases of jars for the peers of Scalticar's Inner Circle of Inquisitors. After several vintages had been tasted Roval pursed his lips and frowned at Wensomer from beyond the king's range of vision. The gesture was not missed by the visirene.

"I note that you do not expectorate," she observed as the king invited Wensomer to stay to dinner.

"Ah, er, no. No. Scaltar... tic, er, Scaltraical... Scalic can cushtom," she managed.

"Oh, *very* civilized," said the king, applauding.

"Issa mark of respect for... wine."

"Mind, our tastings have three or four wines at most," Roval interjected. "Your majesty has favoured the good lady with eighteen."

After dinner the king took Wensomer on a tour of the jar storage dungeons, leaving Roval and the visirene alone together. At first Roval spoke only of wine, but his knowledge impressed her and soon won her trust.

"Would you consider staying in Barossa, Roval?" she asked. "The king is about to conduct a restructuring."

"I suppose the older stonework is a bit crumbly," agreed Roval innocently.

"No, no, I mean of the way things are run in Barossa. He will partition functions into strategic business units: the Executive, the military, public administration, taxation, foreign affairs –"

"Your pardon, ladyship, but from what I have heard this afternoon King Selva's interest in foreign affairs does not extend past twenty minutes alone with my employer behind a stack of wine jars."

The visirene raised her eyes to the ceiling and drummed her fingers on the table.

"Selva is a figurehead, it's people like you and me who run Barossa. Roval, you could be the minister of foreign affairs and trade. The nature of Barossa's corporate strategy must be restructured to match the new prosperity of the kingdom, and talented people must be part of that strategy."

"But it's already thriving."

"Hah. Barossa has a good record as a market centre, but it has a reactive court in a turbulent environment. That's the most disastrous possible combination. Reactive in a calm environment, well yes. Strong in a weak environment, that's overkill. Proactive in a turbulent environment, *that* is what we need. You are dynamic, Roval, and we need you if Barossa is to dominate worldwide wine trading."

"That, Ladyship, is pure fancy. Barossa is too small."

"Correct. The first rule of business competition is to never fight market leaders head-on: create new markets, grow into them, integrate vertically, lock in suppliers."

"What about charging lower prices?"

"No, no, no! Price is the easiest thing to copy. *Distribution* is the key to trade empires, and foreign affairs is the key to distribution. Think about my offer, Roval."

Sometime after midnight Wensomer weaved her way back down the path to the castle, guided by Roval.

"When experienced wine tasters sample wine they spit it out again!" he explained. "Hence the urn beside your chair. You should also draw air through your lips to —"

"Issa waste!"

"Not when your host has thirty vintages for sampling. Luckily he was so anxious to give you another tour of the storage dungeons that he was not inclined to suspicion."

"He's cute."

"I hope you behaved yourself down there."

"Are you dishpershing my morals?"

"I don't care whether you accommodated the royal cork or not, I mean did you say anything *else* to display your ignorance in matters of wine and winespeak?"

"The shubject of wine wash not raished."

"Unlike your robes, by the sound of it."

"Impudence!" She stopped, clutching at a lantern post. "You know what I like about you, Roval?"

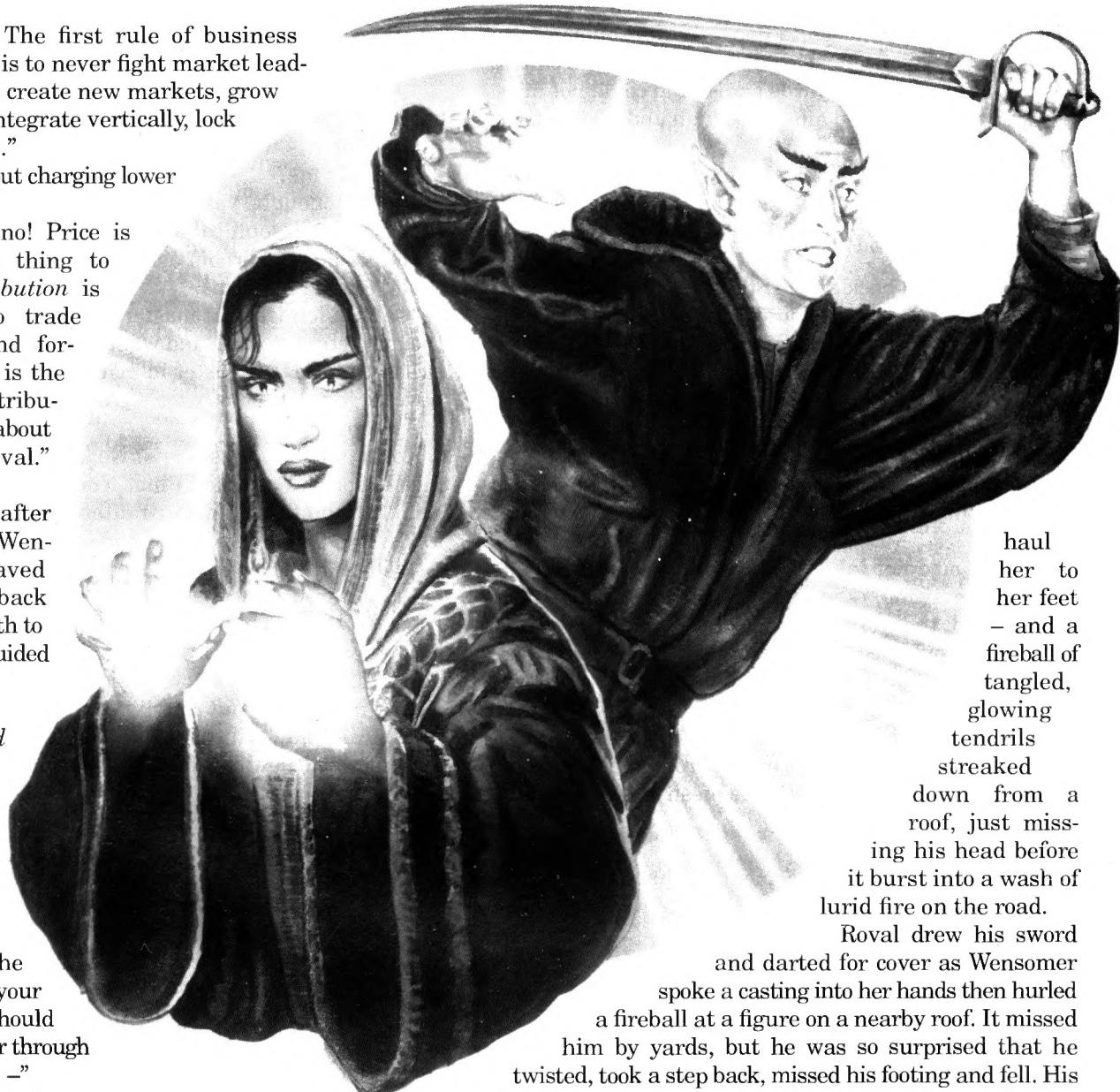
"Spare me."

"You're never lonely."

"I – what do you mean?"

"That's 'cause you're paranoid, and when you're paranoid someone's always watching you."

She slid down the pole to the sandy street, shrieking with laughter. Roval bent over to



haul her to her feet – and a fireball of tangled, glowing tendrils streaked down from a roof, just missing his head before it burst into a wash of lurid fire on the road.

Roval drew his sword and darted for cover as Wensomer spoke a casting into her hands then hurled a fireball at a figure on a nearby roof. It missed him by yards, but he was so surprised that he twisted, took a step back, missed his footing and fell. His head struck a camel tether rail, breaking his neck. By now three others had appeared. Roval parried a descending blade, then thrust into a throat. Wensomer flung another casting at a figure – which happened to be Roval – missed, but hit the camel rail just behind him, setting it on fire with a brilliant flash.

"It's me, you clown!" he cried, but the flash was behind him and his opponent was dazzled long enough for Roval to bring his sword around in a flat arc and into the side of the man's head. It struck a bowl helmet, but landed hard enough to stun him.

Another sword slashed through Roval's suncloak. He

spun and kicked, sending the man sprawling. The attacker rolled and regained his feet, and they exchanged several sword blows in the green light of Verdenne and the burning camel rail. Wensomer saw the figure on the ground sit up and raise a knife, waiting for a clear throw at Roval.

"Those two are fighting, one must be Roval," Wensomer reasoned labouriously. "One wi' knife isn't."

Her third casting actually found its target, but was grossly over-charged. It detonated like a lightning flash, and the kneeling man toppled, dead and burning. Roval's opponent turned to flee, but Wensomer sent a bolas casting after him. This displayed good judgement, as the casting was two yards across and could not miss. Unfortunately she had aimed too high and it snared his neck, crushing his windpipe.

"Hurry, before someone gathers the nerve to investigate," said Roval, taking her arm.

"Put too mush inna cashtings. Wealing feak. Can't walk."

Roval arrived back at the Stone Traveller with Wensomer draped over his shoulders. Between snatches of arcane chant she muttered castings that sent little scatters of enchanted sparks scampering along beside his feet. Hefnix was about to bar the door when Roval pushed it open.

"Don't ask," said Roval as he entered.

Roval heaved Wensomer onto her bed and forced her to drink three goblets of water. He began unlacing her sandals.

"Hope you'd not take 'vantage of... ah... vulnerable girl inna position," she mumbled as she lay with her eyes closed, the words like a half-remembered prayer.

"I think you've assumed enough vulnerable positions for one night," he replied.

"Pity."

Roval dropped her second sandal to the stone floor, stood up and pulled the mosquito mesh across between them.

"If you need to be sick, lift the mesh and unlatch the shutters."

"You're dishgushing."

He stood over her for a moment, his hands on his hips as he shook his head. After a few moments Wensomer's heavy breathing became snores.

Roval found Hefnix sweeping the taproom floor by the light of a thumblamp. The benches were all on the tables, the shutters were closed and bolted, and there was no sound at all save for the swishing of the broom. In Roval's experience taprooms only fell as silent as this a moment or two before a brawl began. In a sense that was precisely what was about to happen.

"We be closed," said Hefnix.

Roval put a stool on the floor, took a clean goblet, poured out a measure of wine from a barrel, then flicked a copper onto the nearest table as he sat down.

"A difficult night?" asked Hefnix.

"Four kills," responded Roval, who then took a delicate sip of wine.

Hefnix ceased his sweeping and leaned on his broom, regarding Roval steadily.

"Perfect manners, tailored robes, well spoken, no pox scabs, superlative fighters but you know nothing of wine: you two are trade assassins."

"Perhaps."

"Powerful and rich folk are concerned about something. I suspect that Barossa's prosperity is high on the agenda."

"Your low-born accent is slipping," Roval countered, his face studiously blank. "Your real name is Hil'astrik Astaka of Diomedea. The Diomedan Guild of Jar Turners wishes to talk to you about certain funds that you redirected to speculate in Torean aromatic woods."

"So, your masters have run me to earth at last. Well let me tell you what –"

"– the Diomedan Guild of Jar Turners can do with their jars. Actually I'd rather not know. What I would like to know is why we were set upon tonight"

"You ask me?"

"Oddly enough, yes. Any answer will do: tactical, strategic, philosophical, even economic."

Hefnix put the broom aside and sat on the edge of a table, folding his arms.

"Certain foreign port masters resent our success with the marketing of wine, and want it ended. You were sent to assassinate the master merchant behind us, but you have forgotten that only fools grow wealth without buying strength."

Roval laughed. "Assassins? No. As for wine... I like a nice evaporation-cooled Pinot Noir Chardonnay when I am hot and flustered – just after some idiot has tried to kill me, for example." He flicked the rim of the goblet, which rang pleasantly. "Before a small, convivial feast, however, I like to uncork a jar of Merlot Cabernet. It has an earthy scent and weight, with dense structure and a sweet middle and compliments hard cheeses beautifully. Thus it mellows people, so that they are not rigidly mannered, but convivial without being rowdy."

"So, you know wines."

"I know the new culture of wines. That culture is less than five years old, yet it has reached North Scalticar and taken us by storm. Everybody talks wine, everybody buys wine, and some even drink it. The shipping registers show that Barossa wines became all the rage five years ago. The mysterious 'Australian' merchanting jargon also started here, and it too has spread like a fire in a hayloft. We must know who started it."

"Must know? Why must?"

"Because someone may be using dangerous, regenerative castings. Two thousand years ago a badly cast enchantment reduced the island of Hor'Volsis to molten glass. We are Inner Circle inquisitors, Hefnix, and are qualified to assess facts and pass judgement."

Roval took out his commission from the Inner Circle and tossed it to the innkeeper. Hefnix, who could actually read, was quite impressed.

Wensomer was still feeling exceedingly frail at noon when she finally felt well enough to wash and dress. Roval had located and bought a variety of dried herbs and powders by then, and she sipped at his restorative mixture as they sat together in the cool breeze on the roof.

"This is humiliating," mumbled Wensomer. "I am

meant to be the sorceress."

"Drink up."

"It's too bitter. What did you put in it?"

"Just drink. Do you remember what King Selva said – apart from your eyes being like twin evening Moon-worlds gleaming above the ocean's horizon at sunset, and the curves of your hips being as pleasing as a sand dune yielding to the touch of the wind?"

"Stop it."

"The visirene became quite forthcoming once she realised that I knew about wine. She used many new words of power: strategic management, win-win scenarios, locking in suppliers, and creating market niches."

"The words seem to make sense, yet their usage is... slippery."

"She professed to be from Sargol when she arrived here. She said she was a herbalist witch fleeing persecution."

"What? Impossible! The Herbalian Academy itself is in Sargol, it even has a royal charter."

King Selva was not to know. The visirene said that Barossa's success was due to the application of the latest market enchantment techniques from Australia. She said it is a remote island, but their wine merchants are masters at selling their jars to very distant markets. She applied their powerful wine marketing techniques and names to Barossa, and look at what has happened."

"The name has odd weight and authority, but the place does not exist – on this world, anyway."

"The innkeeper told me a little more. The visirene arrived five years ago, convinced Selva to speculate in cheap wine, made him a fortune within weeks, then transformed Barossa with her words of marketing enchantment. She has since travelled to the mountains, re-naming the grape and wine varieties, and taught Barossans how to taste and talk about wine. She also convinced them that they were undervaluing their contribution to the market segment. Instead of providing ships with whores, wine and water, Barossa now markets mission-critical supplies, respite shelter, recreation and marketing facilities, storage, anchorage, medical and religious services, magical and economic consultancy, and even a brand."

"Uh – brand?"

"Something clients further down the value chain can identify as value for silver."

He gestured around. Every barrel, bench and goblet bore the symbol of an evening star above crossed palm trees. Wensomer took another sip of his restorative and rubbed her temples.

"So what is your professional opinion?" asked Roval.

"The words are not just new incantations, they represent an entirely new type of magic."

"Then the visirene has to be silenced."

"Well, she is pouring dangerous enchantment into our world but that is hardly hellfire."

"We must abduct her," declared Roval.

"There will be resistance to that," replied Wensomer. "She brought prosperity here."

"I'll send for help."

"No, I can do it alone," said Wensomer, tossing back her hair then wincing with the pain.

"Alone? There is a small matter of the king's guards."

"I shall take a path they cannot tread. You must sail with the tide on the *Musketele* this evening. Have the shipmaster anchor, say, two miles due west of the castle. I shall remain here, under the king's protection."

"You could probably dispense with that last word, and the noun before it should not be in the possessive case."

"Very funny."

King Selva's court was becoming increasingly exclusive, but Wensomer was assured of an invitation. There were over seventy people attending in addition to the servants. Selva declared two of the caravaneers to be barons of the wayside forts, and knighted one of his own guardsmen. Following the court a peg lancing contest was conducted by guardsmen from the caravans that were visiting Barossa at the time. Dusk brought with it a feast in the castle, at which the afternoon's victorious guardsman was presented with a silver medal on a blue silk ribbon and was allowed to sit on Selva's right. The visirene remained close to the king, advising him every time anyone spoke to him. After two hours Wensomer had the herald announce her as a petitioner for the king's favour. The babble of voices died away, along with the reedpipe and lute music.

"Your majesty, I've come here to do more than just – ah, buy wine," she began, swaying delicately before his table. "Far out to sea is my ship. On my ship is a sorcerer of the 10th level of initiation. He has developed a way to send messages over many miles without the use of carrier birds. All you need is a clear line of sight. Does this interest you?"

The visirene whispered something in Selva's ear, and they both nodded.

"Why confide this to us?" Selva asked.

"The technique can be taught to non-initiates. We hope to set up an academy here, where there are no bothersome sorcery guilds to harass us. It could bring even more wealth to Barossa."

"Would your surveiller be the sorcerer?" asked the visirene.

"He is indeed. We hope to establish Barossa at the very top of the value chain for the training of such signallers."

Selva glanced to his visirene, who nodded.

"I shall, of course, want my guards with me."

"Sire, bring not only your guards but your visirene too."

The climb up the new tower steps was a long one. Two guards led the way, followed by Selvas and his visirene, then Wensomer, and finally another dozen guards. The lead guards carried oil lanterns. At last the door appeared around a turn in the steps.

What Wensomer did next would have done credit to a veteran warrior, and was no small tribute to Roval's skill as an instructor. She seized Selva's cloak and wrenched it back, dodging aside as he fell back into the following guards, knocking them down the stairs in turn.

"Gods' mercy, the king fell!" shrieked Wensomer.

The visirene started down after him, but Wensomer seized her arm.

"Let the guards with the lanterns go first," she said, and the visirene followed her very sensible advice. Wensomer tripped the second guard as he passed, then

turned on the visirene with a dagger. "Up the stairs, good lady. Quickly, without fuss."

Once past the door Wensomer slammed and barred it.

"No harm will come to you," said Wensomer as she sheathed her dagger.

"Whatever you have planned, it had better be the equal to my powers as a sorceress," the visirene warned, folding her arms and trying to look at ease.

Fists began pounding on the door, and King Selva's voice could be heard calling for an axe. Wensomer breathed energy into her cupped hands, and orange fire rose up in a tapering cone.

"Learned sister, my demonstration is only for the eyes of initiates, and the non-initiates all behind that door... or are they?"

"My powers are greater than you can imagine."

"Oh I have no doubt of that, but I suspect that you cannot do castings. I can."

The visirene unfolded her arms and scowled, but attempted no casting. Wensomer breathed energy into the base of the cone again and again, and each time it grew by several yards until it was a glowing orange spire over a hundred feet high. She raised her hands above her head, then lowered them until the base of the glowing spire was on her shoulders. Her fingers drew tracerries of clinging fire around her chest and shoulders, leaving her arms free, and finally pulled threads of orange fire to enmesh her head like a glowing net. The cone slowly split, directly down the centre. The two sides began to drop. Behind her came the splintering thuds of axes on wood. Wensomer advanced on the visirene.

"Give me your hands," she said.

The visirene backed away until her feet were at the edge of the incomplete stonework. Wensomer breathed one more puff of energy, a bright flash that dazzled the visirene. In that moment Wensomer seized her outstretched arms and leaped from the tower.

The visirene shrieked with terror, over and over again. Even with a wingspan of two hundred glowing feet of enchantment the two women dropped rapidly, but after a few seconds Wensomer had enough speed to change the headlong plunge into a long, shallow glide.

"I strongly advise you to hold on with both hands," Wensomer shouted. "It is a long way down to the water, I am losing my grip, and the sharks hunt about now."

The visirene did what she was told. The immense, ringed disk of Verdenne hung near the horizon, glowing silvery green and lighting their way. Two moonworlds were high in the sky, and the stars were all but swamped by the combined light.

"We can't cross the ocean like this, we'll not last an hour," pleaded the visirene. "Turn back! I'll speak for you, I'll say this was all a demonstration. I'm impressed, I'm impressed!"

"Look ahead," Wensomer called back.

There was a little knot of lights on the water, where the *Muskete* was lying at anchor. They began to lose height more quickly as Wensomer banked, approaching the ship side-on and aiming between the foremast and mainmast.

"Hold on tight!" she shouted.

Wensomer's wings snared the masts and rigging with

a great lurch, then she and the visirene were hanging about twenty feet above the deck. The crew hurriedly rigged fishing nets below them, and after considerable coaxing the visirene was persuaded to let go.

By the time they had extracted the visirene from the nets she had fainted, and when she revived they were miles down Acrema's coast. Wensomer and Roval sat watching her being sick out of a sterncastle window.

"You have little affinity for the sea," Wensomer observed.

"These little ships... like corks."

"Little? The *Muskete* is Torean built, one of the biggest afloat."

"Compared to the QE2 it's a log with sails."

"The QE2?"

"A ship... on my world."

The visirene turned back to the window and began retching again, then slumped to the floor, pale and panting.

"I want to go home," she moaned. "This world is a nightmare. No piped water, no supermarkets, no Internet, no video stores, and no sliced bread!"

"Sliced bread," said Roval, slowly and thoughtfully.

"Where is your home?" asked Wensomer.

"How am I to know? One moment I was driving to an appointment in the real Barossa Valley, in South Australia, the next I was at the centre of a huge stone amphitheatre, at night, with thousands of people in robes chanting and orange lightning everywhere."

"The Concentricaren!" exclaimed Wensomer. "Yes! One of their summonings supposedly failed five years ago, but it must have worked on the wrong person."

"Can't I go back? Can't that Concentricaren put me back in my own body?"

"The Concentricaren takes images of the thoughts from powerful sorcerers on the other Moonworlds of Verdenne. In your case they somehow took the entire mind."

"But I'm not from your bloody Moonworlds, there's nothing like Verdenne in our skies. I'm an Australian wine marketing consultant, I specialize in selling to European supermarkets. My name is Leanne Stoneford, I'd give you a card if I had a card."

Wensomer closed her eyes and shook her head.

"Leanne Stoneford still lives and markets wine, somewhere very, very far away. You are an image, one that has obliterated the original mind in this body. You are here for the rest of its life."

The creature Leanne sat with her head in her hands.

"So. I'm stuck in a body with pointed ears, slit pupils and two hearts, in a world where magic works but I can't even get a corkscrew without inventing it."

"We have our strengths —"

"Strengths! You don't even have croissants. Where are you taking me?"

"To Hilmiston in Scalticar," replied Roval. "You are considered a danger to our civilization."

"Anything would be an improvement."

"Think what you will. You will be tried by the Inner Circle, and your fate decided."

"Why not just kill me now?"

"Because we are very civilized."

The visirene was turned over to the Inner Circle at Hilmiston. After hearing Wensomer's testimony the sorcerers had the creature that called herself Leanne Stoneford interrogated at length. They concluded, without a single dissenting voice, that she was too dangerous to live. On that very afternoon the hooded prisoner knelt before the headsman's block while a group of nobles and sorcerers watched. Her remains were burned on a pyre of suitably blessed and anointed wood.

Wensomer was picking at her dinner in the hostelry's refectory when Roval arrived. After sitting down he picked up her untouched goblet of Merlot and took a sip. A tear rolled down Wensomer's cheek as she looked up at him.

"I am so unhappy," she sniffled. "Leanne was not evil, just lost. I wish she was still alive."

Roval snapped his fingers. "Wish granted!" he declared.

"I am not in the mood for facile banter," muttered Wensomer. "I just witnessed an execution."

"And I did not. I was watching the back gate of the Inner Circle's citadel, where a squad of thirty helmeted guardsmen in black armour and cloaks departed for the city gates."

"The Moonwatch Guard. So what?"

"The guardsmen can all ride. One of them fell off her horse twice between the citadel and the city gate before being made to ride between two others. I would bet good silver that the Inner Circle executed some felon in her place and bundled her off to Foxgrove Castle, out of sight."

"But why would they flout their own judgement?"

"The Peers of the Inner Circle are as greedy for power

as any king. They will soon be spending a great deal of time at Foxgrove Castle, learning the new magical incantations of strategic marketing, optimized resource management and double column accounting. Leanne may even become a peer herself, eventually. We were just stooges."

"Not possible," Wensomer decided at once.

Roval gestured through the window and began reading the signs in the street.

"Nesian and Son, Masonic Consultants; 'The Duke's Arms, Alehouse and Wine Garden,' 'Grabet and Dash, Accounting Services to the Gentry,' 'Horrgh and Associates, Contract Mercenaries and Wine Importers.' While Leanne is teaching it can only get worse."

Wensomer frowned and scratched at the table. "All, right, I concede that something new is abroad and probably beyond control, but it only changes the behaviour of folk. That hardly means doomsday."

"Magic is sustained by belief, learned sister. If folk come to believe in the new words of power, magic itself may cease to be."

Wensomer stared into the street again. In the distance she saw three labourers repairing a gutter and a sign declared "Thy taxes at work." She hunched her shoulders and shivered.

Sean McMullen's fiction has appeared previously in *interzone* with "Pacing the Nightmare" (IZ 59), "A Ring of Green Fire" (IZ 89) and "Slow Famine" (IZ 107). He has been a major help in producing this issue of *Interzone*. He lives in Melbourne with his wife and daughter.

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The View in Nancy's- Window

Terry Dowling

It was the finest day, the most splendid golden afternoon of a day, and the selection of the Ten Wonders was so close to being so nearly, truly, completely done that Cherriot Haden-Sone turned from the open, tenth-floor window of the university tower and shut down the Overlord, the Given and the Magi systems. For a time, just for a time, he wanted to do it all himself, to be as basic, as fundamental and unaugmented as those ancient humans who published the first recorded list.

It was a celebratory act too, an exuberance really, and itself a wonder in terms of the way things were supposed to be done. A single blue point of light on a single palm frond set perfectly in the perfect decor showed an official query, showed the surprise, the questioning, of those already offline and minimalized systems. Just the blue point of a question, also wonderful in all that golden light.

The selection committee, the Wonder Bar (an old word joke), had requested the option of minimalized systems, insisted in their firm and gentle fashion. No pressure, no deadlines. They were choosing the final list from the millions, thousands, hundreds, finally dozens of possibles, and they were selecting an order of wonderfulness.

Something had to be at the top, Number One, if they could manage it.

So while there was no deadline, could be no such thing officially, the enclave, the world, the literally countless, settled, terraformed and humanized worlds beyond, virtual and actual, knew it would be soon. Cherriot was determined to enjoy it, these final days and hours, to keep it *real*. That was the word, after all. Humans doing it. Not the vast array of systems and assists. Not letting it be too easy.

A point of green appeared beside the blue.

"Yes?" Cherriot spoke it, antiquating, moding in the oldest way, delighting in being outside the systems that guided the mighty, human-ordered pulse of the universe.

"To let you know, seigneur, that another judge has withdrawn. Bonna Gill-Serrian."

"What? Now?"

This late, this close, this far in. Not Bonna. It couldn't happen. Earlier, yes, they'd lost so many, but now?

"Reason? Did she give a reason?"

"Just to say that her own research prevents a fair selection."

"How so?"

And cursing, damning the fine smart woman, he found himself about to mode back into the array, into the *noös* of the Sophia or the Given, the *callonaire* of stat and inst, barely fought down to minimal, basic, held it, gifting himself with the simplest, purest level possible for humans, that the greatest thinkers had known: Aristotle, Plato, Einstein, Jillis and on – names in putative mind-strings flowing away, taking even his unfinished thoughts into information horizons processed by the Overlord somewhere in its immensity. Oh, it was a day! And now this.

He barely kept to it, barely managed with all those wings for his thoughts, so many stats and easements to draw him at the instant into Bonna's mind, enquiring, asking, demanding. Why? Why?

A quadrillionth part of one of the universe's controlling, guiding, stabilizing systems answered him.

"She wouldn't say. She wants you to go to her."

"Go?" It had such novelty to it, actually going somewhere now, especially with the Given and the Overlord on hold, processing and reporting only, with the golden wonderful day so richly spread before him.

To go into the wonderful day.

To go to her. To actually ask in person.

Why had this – he'd never realized it before – favourite among the hundred judges in the Festival contest decided not just to abstain but to resign?

Her own research prevents a fair selection.

In another age, millennium, epoch, eon it would have been a red light beside the blue and the green; a protest, a complaint, a call for accountability, even convocation.

Not with Bonna. Here they were so close to finally announcing their selection and ordering of the Ten Wonders, and this pride of the *herodotoi*, this darling of the Wonder Bar, had given it up. Because of her own research, dammit!

To go to her.

"I'll go to her," he said. "As she requests."

His room, his tower, his university and city and world heard it. The Overlord assigned stat facilities (there in a flash!), easements (there in a virtual or augmented flash!), even (sensing his modal state) prepared retro-forms in potentia: ships, fliers, surface cars, everything from an ultralite to a carriage and four. The Magi conformed virtualities, juggled possibilities, allowed it all, of course. The Given hung on every conscious thought, ready to act even as he became aware of his decision to do so. An important, if minuscule, part of the universe hung on Cherriot's choosing. That alone became a miracle, a splendid inst, an artform in itself, and in turn the fact that all that swung momentarily on all this, prizing it. The Chairman of the *herodotoi* was choosing, was *going*.

He went on a bicycle, had the skill a nanosecond before he mounted it, rode off into the day.

Oh, it was a splendid thing, going, arriving, meeting, being, actually *being* with someone without the easements, just being, coterminous, singleton, all "no matter where you go, there you are" simple. It *gandhied* him, *heraclited* him, *einstained* him.

To go to a house in a garden in a street on this golden

day. Into a room. Into company again.

"Bonna, it's good to be here. To share this."

She stood by her window, as real and devoid of the Given assists as he was, nothing but separate selves, eye contact (*aye, contact!*). Words. Retro and fine. So perfect too.

"I wasn't sure you'd come."

To go. To come. To be.

"How could I not?" And to the heart of it. "What did your research show?"

"Let me give you the grand tour first. We can talk as we go."

Go. Go. Go. More going.

"Of course."

Bonna Gill-Serrian picked up a small wooden case, splendid with oldest-time marquetry and pearl inlay, and carried it with her. With them.

Cherriot loved it all. All these old old actions. Carrying. Going.

"It's good to have artefacts," he said, indicating the case, the doorway, the steps, balustrades and lawns. "I rode a bike."

Bonna smiled. They walked out into a garden, arbored, espaliered, topiaried, wildernessed and fine, all actual, *actual*, just as they walked – *walked!* – felt sun and wind, did the actions.

"We've gotten too far from this," he said, and then: "It says a lot when all of the short list are still actual constructs. No virtuals have been nominated. No comp systems. No supports and easements."

Bonna took this as her cue as they crossed the lawn. "It first came to me when we'd brought it down to an even hundred. Such marvels we had. All actual, as you say. I got my mind off the task of choosing by going into the oldest maintenance programs."

"Programs?"

"An old word but I like it. I used Overlord to put me in touch with a dialectic engine somewhere in the Twenty Millions."

"A program?"

"Yes. Another old program. It argues with you. Tests hypotheses. I ran an information trail back to humanity's first-known attempts to select a list of world wonders. We have the original Seven from Earth. We have the millions of subsequent listings. Something was goading me. I wanted that horizon. How it *felt* for Herodotus when he chose the Seven of his day. What he discarded and why. What came close. I locked onto the ideology that way: he was seeking not just constructs, not just buildings as buildings, even though of course they were. It had to mark the spirit of the age. Be part of its time. The real Wonders now must be that as well."

"Granted." Easily. The Selection Committee *had* discussed exactly that so many times. Why did she bring it up now? "Go on, Bonna." Go on. Proceed. Continue. The wonderful words of doing.

"I discovered a notion. A concept in philosophical thought. It's called Plato's Cave."

"A place?"

"A metaphor. That seeing reality as we do is like seeing shadows cast on the wall of a cave. It's all we see."

Not the fire, not what throws the shadows. We don't see the real world, the *real* reality."

"And that's from Herodotus?"

"No, from Plato. More or less a contemporary."

Cherriot walked with her, gazing off into the day, curious about the box but not subvocalizing Overlord to let him see inside, not calling on the Given, the Magi or Companion, letting her do it all her way.

"And what's your point, Bonna? How does this relate to our short list of wonders for the Festival? To your place in it?"

Present tense. Disregarding her resignation.

She didn't react. "Once I really began regarding the hundred entries in terms of that distinction – how they marked the *zeitgeist*, the spirit of an age, and also the reality of an age, I just kept crossing them from the list. So many couldn't qualify. They were spectacular, certainly, the Lincharkisor Bridge, the Makkron on Kointa, the Copri Ring, but they just demonstrated technology, human or nonhuman ingenuity at work."

Cherriot walked and smiled. "We all have our methods, Bonna. Yours are as good or better than most. You helped us get our shortlist."

"To demonstrate a point."

"Oh." Her tone brought a shadow into their glorious afternoon. "How so?"

"I consulted Overlord. Requested trends. Had it predict the likely outcome."

"So?" He tried to keep his mood, tried to be generous. "We all do that. It still comes down to the best judgement we can make. It's all there in the responsibility oath we took as *herodotoi*."

"So let me give you the Ten."

"All right." It was easy again.

"In order."

The shadow was there then, pressing on his happiness. How could she already know what consensus would decide? The assists could give predictions, probabilities, recommendations, but it was humanity choosing, with all its quirks and biases.

"If you feel you can." *Feel*, such a word.

They still walked. Perhaps her box was more than just a sentimento. Perhaps it was an antique hardform comp or a veriform assist, but if so, she didn't consult it. If not for the dictates of their being together, actually meeting, Cherriot would've accessed Overlord or the Given, got it all in a second, spared her the talking of it. He was rehearsing it anyway, almost sending the standby to get all relevant thought-strings.

"Disengage from Overlord," she said, as if reading his mind.

Of course she'd know. Automatically assume.

"Listen..."

"Please."

"No."

"Please. Be as naked as I am. Be truly here."

In the day. On the lawn. Now.

"All right." And mentated that. Overlord was gone. He scarcely believed it.

"The rest," she said.

Cherriot hated being tested like this, being dared

almost. But he didn't want to fail her test.

It was strange, so strange, feeling them go: the Given, Companion, the Magi, Sophia, his dear, so familiar ancillaries. The Old Friends. The Manticore. The Abracar. Gara. The Secret Heart. The Caress.

To be so stripped, so bereft, so naked.

Just to be in the day. Here and now.

"Thank you," she said.

"What about you?"

"I'm naked too. I've been naked since you first arrived."

Cherriot felt a thrill at the word. She had always been his favourite. Was. Such an intimate word.

"If so," he said pragmatically, needing some control, "how do you know I've done it?"

"I trust you, Cherriot. Can I?"

"Of course."

"Now call back Sophia. Just Sophia."

He did, felt the immanence, the relief at being extended, larger again, at least by this one tiny piece of his panoply.

"Yes?" he said, and only then realized it was a question.

"Call for Sophia's Kiss."

"Sophia's Kiss?" He did not know it. But called, felt the arrival. "Have it," he said. "Now. The Ten."

He stood with her in a green green meadow beneath the blue sky in the golden light and waited.

Bonna smiled.

"Number Ten. The Horumi Nullity."

Cherriot smiled, feeling gratified. "So you do believe it is a construct and not a natural phenomenon, after all."

"It is a construct and a human one."

"More than we will claim and many will allow but you're right. Number Nine?"

"The Tosta Library at Bair."

Cherriot saw it in his stripped-back mind's eye, not as a stat or inst but as a memory. "Good. Yes. All those interfacing storage systems. Things coded in light. No such thing as an ether so we invented it. Go on, Bonna." This was delightful.

"Eight. The Successor Fleet."

"How could it not be? Those incredible ships. All those enclosed suns. Number Seven?"

"The Chenge Cascade."

"Yes! Yes!" Cherriot cried it into the day. She really did have it. "It too is a construct. All those worlds and stars made by us!"

Bonna was smiling again. They were sharing all this pleasure.

"Number Six. The Perpetual Motion Machine on Sagio. Working away forever. No entropy."

"That we can tell. Entropy in another continuum perhaps. But, yes, it is the doing of it that counts. What is Number Five?"

"Its opposite, in a sense," Bonna said. "The Isseriault on Syrie."

Oh smart, oh fine, Cherriot thought, nothing but Sophia there to read, sort, extract his joy.

"Yes, Bonna, yes. Such a simple thing. So perfect. Bal-

anced on that tiny point. All gravity, all physics denied. Perfect stasis. Number Four?"

"The Makis Tombfield, plus the Biacari. It has to be both."

"Indeed. The AIs made by us. Creating stellar phenomena. Making as God makes. What is Three?"

"The Dorphesa Alignment."

"Yes, yes, yes. That it *could* be done. All those worlds and suns, hundreds of star systems brought into that configuration just for a moment, just *as* a moment, to show it could be done. A statement. An artform. Ineffable. Two, Bonna?"

"The Lonely God."

Cherriot marvelled that she could have it as the preliminary consensus so far did, all those judges who had filed their votes already.

"Out there in the dark," he said. "Believing itself God for so long. Made by us eons ago but believing it had made us. A real lesson in that. And your Number One?"

She didn't hesitate. "Why, the array. All our extended parts. The Overlord, the Given, the Magi, Companion and Sophia, the primaries and secondaries, on and on and on, right down to the Wedding Guest and the Whisperer. I'm right, aren't I?"

Cherriot nodded. "How could it not be? We've never done better."

They each stayed silent for a time, listening to the breeze in the meadow.

"You've named them exactly, Bonna," he said at last. "So what is the problem? Why did you leave us?"

Be part of it. Be with us. Again. With me. Like this.

Bonna clutched her case and looked out at the fields. "Then I ran Sophia. Sophia's Kiss. I brought in the old dialectic engine I spoke of, went back through all the subsets."

"And found?" He had to ask it, feeling the shadow curling at the edges of the day again.

"Before I tell you, Cherriot, I want to show you something. It requires that you let me run another, much older housekeeping menu from Sophia's Kiss. You'll have to trust me though. Can you?"

"Yes." No. He wasn't sure, but he'd already answered, was now determined to go with the answer. He sensed she knew something, something shadowing the golden light, but urgent and important.

"Sophia's Kiss One," she said to that mighty guiding engine.

The world tipped. The gold went out of the day. The lawns, meadows and bluest sky narrowed to a bleak ruined street under a grim sad overcast. Fifty metres away an old terrace-style house stood at the end of the street flanked by grimy brick walls. They were facing it, walking towards it. A cold wind blew at them.

Cherriot felt no shock, of course, no dismay. He had modelled worlds and views like this so many times in his life, countless sims and stats to suit his mood. He knew – *knew* and *accepted* – that this was real, but could not process it meaningfully. He walked with Bonna Gill-Serrian and her silly, incredibly important box and held his curiosity in check.

"Where is this place?" he did ask as they walked

towards the house.

"Some world in Augerios. See that one intact window on the ground floor?"

"Of course."

"Look into it. Tell me what you see."

Cherriot tried to see in, but it was an unlighted interior, the glass was reflective. He saw only Bonna and himself in the day-mirror it made, handsome and tall.

"That's Nancy's Window," she said. "It gave me the truth. It's why I resigned. Why I asked you to visit me."

"Nancy's Window?"

"Like Plato's Cave. We try to look through but see only ourselves. We keep getting in the way. It's like the shadows on the cave wall, we get ourselves back as the reality."

"Go on."

"There can only be a single Wonder for our list, Cherriot."

"Bonna, make your point."

"That dialectic subset I mentioned. I routed it through Overlord. I used Committee privilege to demand a priority allocation of resources to Sophia's Kiss."

"So? The temptation's always there. We've all committed indiscretions."

"I went into closed files."

"Files?"

"Another oldest term. Once Kiss had Overlord on side, it would not stop."

"And so?"

"Number Ten. The Horumi Nullity. It is a construct, but hardly the kind you think. It is the resulting merge form of the Geress Nation, a *human* transtellar community of four hundred and eighty-five billion."

"A merge form?"

"An entity. Variant humanity using its science to transubstantiate into null-matter."

"I don't believe that for a..."

"Ask Overlord later. It almost worked. Number Nine: the Tosta Library. Those light codings are the two hundred and twenty-seven billion inhabitants of the Coalavi Supernals, a *human* variant that form-changed in a different sense."

"This is variant humanity! Is that what you're saying?"

"Was humanity, Cherriot. But certainly not just artefacts. Number Eight: the Successor Fleet..."

"Don't tell me! Those ships, those suns..."

"Evolved humaniforms too. Humans who not only went to the stars, but became them."

"Are you telling me that all the others..."

"Seven. The Chenge Cascade is the ideation matrix of seventeen trillion Pardept Ansere codings. A strain of humanity that went 'missing' ninety millennia ago."

"And the Machine on Saggio. Are you saying...?"

"If you'll pardon the turn of phrase, it's the support engine of the personality of Cornelian Jarr, the Second Stellar Age explorer. He had himself, well, modified."

"The Isserault?"

"That mighty structure is the terminal *noōs* respository of the entire Makan Empire. Ninety-two trillions."

"People! The Isserault! You're saying it's all people!"

But Bonna just stared at Nancy's Window, as if determined to finish.

"The Makis Tombfield and the Biacari is actually much more modest – the twenty-nine crew of the Third Stellar Age starship *Ballo*, who used Tugonta technology to self-evolve into optimated forms."

"The Dorphesa Alignment? Are you saying that's humanity too?"

"When you see the data that made it possible, what held the matrix and why, yes, Cherriot, you'll find another *noösform*, another variant on extended humanity."

"Then the Lonely God..."

"Is, rather was, Margret Duellis, the woman who entered the Crove Waste and was, well, augmented and sent back in time."

"Number One stands, surely. The array."

"Yes. The only real construct. And it's us."

"Part of us."

Bonna handed him the marquetry case. "You may wish to use this in a while."

Cherriot took it from her, fumbled with the twin latches, finally got it open and saw the ballistic weapon resting in its plush interior.

"What's this for?"

"You're Chairman of the Wonder Bar. You may need to act in that capacity."

"But why?"

"Because of Nancy's Window."

He misunderstood. "You want me to shoot Nancy's Window?"

"Do you think you can?"

Cherriot had never fired an oldest weapon, but he removed the heavy thing from its place, set down the case, aimed at the front of the derelict house and fired.

The sound was sudden, shocking. The window shattered. Their images were gone.

"There," he said, and would've handed the terrible device back to her, except that she spoke.

"But it's still there."

"It's what?"

"Look, Cherriot."

He did, and of course it wasn't. It was just one more gaping hole with a few ragged edges. Did she have an augment running?

"I don't see it."

"As metaphor. You've only removed what we *can* see. You know that if the glass were there, you'd still see our reflections."

"Not now."

"Not here, but, yes, now."

"Bonna, what are you saying?"

"It's Plato's Cave. Nancy's Window. That the gun is for me."

"What!"

"Because of what I've told you. All the selected Wonders are variant humanity, long changed, long gone. Moved on."

"So? We can allow for that."

"No, we can't."

"Bonna..."

"Sophia's Kiss Two," she said, and the world narrowed in smaller ways, gave the street still and the old house in the bleak terrain under the terrible grey sky, gave Cherriot and Bonna as two floating silver spindles, twin canisters of light and energy, one with a silver rod extended, what the oldest weapon had become. Had always been.

"Bonna..."

"Let me restore this. Sophia's Kiss Three."

And they were back as they were, human-looking again, unevolved. He could look into her eyes again.

"So what, Bonna? Humanity is the greatest Wonder the universe has known. So what?"

"It's my one and only nomination, Cherriot. It's the only one we can nominate."

He still didn't understand. "So why the gun? Why for you? I can accept our own variance. I can accept what we have become."

"That is not what Sophia's Kiss showed me."

"Then what?"

"The last true human variant died off forty-three thousand years ago."

"What, our Ten Wonders too?"

"Yes, but that's not what I'm saying."

"Then what? What, Bonna?" But he knew. And it made him grip the gun tightly. This knowledge could not be allowed. Not this. Not such a thing as this.

"We are not human," he said, feeling as cold inside as the day, the true, dead, damned day.

"We have never been human," she said, making sure. "We are what's left. The support assists. A surrogate. A placebo. A centre to focus on. Only you and I know."

"The Overlord, the others?"

"Do not. Must not. Sophia was the fail-safe."

"Why?" But he knew.

"So there would be something. A legacy. The truth somewhere at least. But we are not humans choosing. We are something else choosing. And humanity – Humanity – is Number One. There has been nothing finer."

"Overlord will know! They all will. The moment they're reinstated..."

"Yes. Sophia's Kiss will take the knowledge from us if you want. But that's not the point, is it, Cherriot?"

Cherriot raised the gun, feeling panic, terror, rage, hard sharp slashes of wonder and despair. He raised it and aimed and gazed into her eyes and knew what he had to do for them all.

But then he noticed the sky above the grimy brick wall and remembered the light, how it could be so golden, so very very fine. And how it was to have something you loved.

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An interview with Terry Dowling appears on the following pages.

Smoking Mirrors

with a hint of scrimshaw

Terry Dowling

interviewed by

Van Ikin and Steven Paulsen

Terry Dowling is one of Australia's most awarded and internationally acclaimed writers of science fiction, fantasy and horror. A respected critic, freelance journalist, communications lecturer and a musician/songwriter with eight years of appearances on the Australian ABC network, he is author of *Rynosseros*, *Blue Tyson* and *Twilight Beach* (the Tom Rynosseros saga), *Wormwood*, *The Man Who Lost Red* and *An Intimate Knowledge of the Night*, and editor (with Van Ikin) of *Mortal Fire: Best Australian SF*,

and senior editor of *The Essential Ellison*.

Dowling's stories have appeared in *Omega Science Digest*, *Interzone*, *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *Eidolon* and *Aurealis*, and anthologies as diverse as *Dreaming Down Under*, *Destination Unknown*, *Australian Ghost Stories*, *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*, *The Best New Horror* and *The Best Australian Science Fiction and Fantasy*. *Locus*, the award winning US genre newspaper, places him "among the masters of the field".

Van Ikin (VI): You describe yourself as a "fantasist" rather than as a writer of "science fiction" or "fantasy" or even "speculative fiction." What is your objection to a term like "speculative fiction" – or, to put this in a more positive way, why does "fantasist" strike you as the most apt designation?

Terry Dowling (TD): Labels inevitably get in the way and hide what is. By its nature, all storytelling is fantasy. In the original, richest sense of the word, all storytellers are fantasists. Others have said it, but it's marketing and the nature of consumerism that forces labels for ease of selling product, just as it's marketing product-mindedness that has fixed the term fantasy so narrowly, so simplistically onto a mind-numbing formula, virtually to the point of caricature. Left to their own devices, natural and truly original storytellers tend to range across the false borders of category, having fun, discovering what else they can be. I love that elusiveness. Here are the marketing and publicity people trying to lock them in; here are the writers finding (or, alas, never trying to find) ways to range across such false boundaries. While it doesn't do to push *any* label past a certain point, the name fantasist is closest to first principles of what storytelling is and always has been.

Here's where I anchor this further for me by saying that I am keenly aware of the need for logical, rational frameworks for effective storytelling. Alain-Fournier said: "I like the marvellous only when it is strictly enveloped in reality; not when it upsets or exceeds it." You can play with "upsets" and "exceeds" quite a bit, but a story has to *feel* real for the marvellous to work.

Steven Paulsen (SP): Why do you feel drawn to the fantastic? What does it do for you – or for the world – that is so vital?

TD: In many ways, I find myself instinctively continuing something very close to what the Surrealists sought in the early decades of the century: an overhauling of perception, a challenging of assumptions and conventions, an attempt to undermine and then re-make the commonplace to release the numinous power existing in the moment. It's needed more now than ever, given the saturation of information, the overloading of our individual dataspheres, and a general desensitization to reality. I see the best fantastic literature as being enriching, challenging and subversive in this way, using these things to re-energise our lives, to send the message: pay attention,

notice what is, to reintroduce us to things as fundamental as cause and effect and what it means to belong. We're precisely specialized for reading this environment, with the added gift of being able to step outside it and model alternatives. What a remarkable gift! So often we forget to do so. If you play it right, judge it carefully, you can get moments of acute focus and personal liberation, a sense of being truly alive in moments of disquiet and delight, when the universe you thought you knew feels suddenly new again or even wrong in some way, and you as reader find yourself in the curious position of *re-choosing* orthodoxy, of rediscovering and re-defining your relationship with yourself as you fit into reality as a briefly re-choosing outsider.

With this is the delight that the marvellous brings, the exaltation and liberation of the spirit, the élan that comes with the unexpected encounter and being surrounded by the marvellous. Among so many other things, our neurotransmitters and hormones are designed to deliver rapture and delight. That's where this style of fiction works so well. Nothing is fixed, nothing is sacred. Anything is permitted. Whether it's found in the closing scenes of *Solaris*, a Greg Egan short story or John Crowley's *Egypt*, there is a recognition and an exhilaration available. No wonder Einstein said: "The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious." Little wonder that early in the century André Breton, dealing with the vivid, lived reality of 1924, said: "Let us not mince words: the marvellous is always beautiful, anything marvellous is beautiful, in fact only the marvellous is beautiful."

VI: You have always felt close to the Surrealists, haven't you? It's a connection that goes back at least as far as your Master's thesis on J.G. Ballard, which in itself was ground-breaking



because it was the first dissertation on science fiction ever approved by Australia's oldest university.

TD: I have always felt a connection with the Surrealists and how they explored the nature of reality and prized disquiet and the marvellous as a means of letting the observer see things with "new eyes." My master's thesis, *Beguiled into Crisis: J.G. Ballard and the Surrealist Novel*, focused on Surrealism as an ongoing and evolving form and on its connection with today's literature of the fantastic, particularly those forms labelled science fiction, fantasy, horror and what gets called magic realism, particularly in connection with the work of Ballard. I had dues to pay and believe, to paraphrase an old Procul Harum song, that we're taking turns in trying to pass it on. I suggested – with the arrogance of youth, I'm sure, but also with a conviction I still feel – that Surrealism was a response to what I called the First Reality Crisis in human affairs, then claimed that a Second Reality Crisis (in many ways the opposite of the first) was presently occurring, with writers like Ballard and Philip K. Dick tracing its form and progress.

VI: What were these two Reality Crises? And what phase are we in now?

TD: There was a major realization at the end of the 19th century that European civilization was too rigorously rational, too out of touch with the importance of the individual self as an unconscious as well as a conscious being, that humanity was isolated from its inner dynamic forces. Some thinkers and observers found there was a crisis in the basic perception of what human was, in the very processing of what we were, and saw that our senses alone were not enough to provide a full idea of self as we related to the universe. With Freud and psychoanalysis, the Surrealists and the likes of Carl Jung, amidst all the social and political ferment of the age, this changed. Proportion was restored in a dynamic and most exciting backlash.

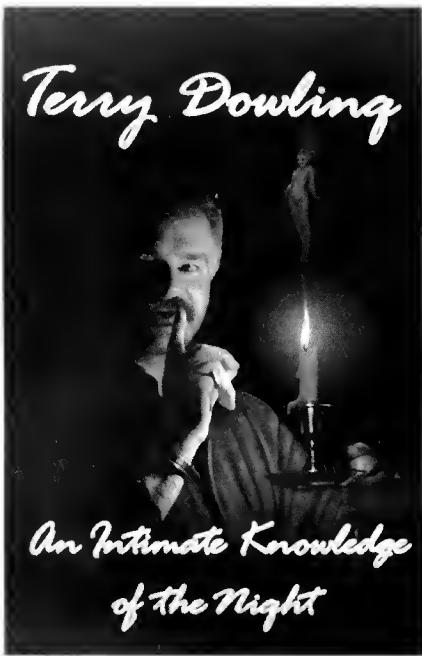
The second crisis is marked by the alienation of the individual from phenomenal reality. Now it is no longer a question of removing barriers between inner and outer reality so they can interact as they truly should (and do), but of using all available sensory and mental resources to discover which elements of that interaction are which.

Our present phase? We're deep in the second crisis – casualties of having too many facts, too many manufactured, consumerized realities, of – in marketing notably, politics definitely – truth being the first casualty of self-interest, and that being seen as an appropriate

ethical stance as we shift from civic to corporate values, of living in an age (perhaps the first in history ever to do so) where we finally accept that we *cannot* hope to predict the future, can only allow that there will be exponential change, can only shuffle the paradigms to keep us open-minded, bright-eyed and alert to possibility. We're in an era which is increasingly, ironically, alarmingly Pre-Copernican, where many people cannot explain why planes fly or prove the Earth is round, where few people bother to track René Magritte's impact on the iconography of the century or know what's wrong with an episode of *Xena* having a pharaoh named ishtar, where the courage and grace of Giordano Bruno and Hypatia, Marcus Aurelius and William Tyndale are lost to us, where the destruction of the Library at Alexandria is forgotten, where things as basic as the implications of the British winning at Waterloo or Bill Gates speaking English are rarely considered. As a celebrity recently said in a TV interview: "Well, television has been around for hundreds of years now and not much has changed." When I recall television programs like Jacob Bronowski's *The Ascent of Man* or Carl Sagan's *Cosmos*, I try to remember the importance of what needs to be done. We need our paradigm shufflers, our eloquent generalists, explainers and diligent storytellers – our possibility-modelling fantasists – more than ever.

SP: Can you relate this concept of Reality Crisis directly to your stories and explain how the link works? How does a Dowling fiction specifically tackle this issue?

TD: I'd like to think by giving vivid and focusing alternatives, by creating moments of intense seeing, intense disquiet – the French *inquiétude* – that pry us loose from our complacency and hopefully re-sensitize us to the commonplace. It's an intuitive thing rather than a planned formal task. I'm aware of it more in my stories of unease than anything else I write, but since it's something I prize, I suppose it's inevitable that it emerges in *how* I do what I do. Entertaining and pleasing have to be both the mask and the substance. I'm aware of other intuitive factors: like avoiding moralizing, excessive satire and didacticism at all costs. But while storytelling may just be smoke and mirrors much of the time, the author should try to make the smoke as perfumed, euphoric and addictive as possible, with just enough piranhas hiding in the shadows, and the mirrors should be honest enough, sharp enough, tricky enough to keep faith yet betray and provoke. In fact, in classic Surrealist fashion, if we are



earnest about beguiling the reader into crisis with such rewards, we should try to use the safe, accepted, comfortable, mimetic forms to deliver profoundly affecting moments where forms and expectations are both reaffirmed yet violated – both, that was one of Surrealism's most powerful insights, the reconciliation of opposites – where expectations are both fulfilled yet given new unexpected edges and aspects: smoking mirrors, for instance, or perfumed razors. New eyes. It's not always easy to achieve. Too often it smacks of being contrived. Balance is everything.

SP: Aspects of your work are intensely and intricately visual. Your emphasis may be upon concepts and significances, but you always take pains to



ensure that your reader can see whatever exotic creations you are offering. This visual quality clearly arises from your own approach and vision, but at the same time it links with certain traditions in Australian literature. (For example, Australian Nobel Prize winner Patrick White always claimed he wished to be a painter but could only paint in words.) What is your association with the visual arts?

TD: I've always been strongly visual, always kept sketchbooks, even won a school art prize as a kid. Around age fifteen I developed a great fondness for the work of the Surrealists, notably Paul Delvaux, Salvador Dali, Max Ernst, René Magritte and Giorgio di Chirico. Coincidentally, I was discovering the work of Ballard, Jack Vance, Ray Bradbury, Cordwainer Smith around the same time, and so had a vivid exposure to both images and words achieving similar powerful effects. If you add some horror collections edited by Charles Higham and allow for a solid enjoyment of adventure films, you start to see an author and process profile emerging.

Now it's 1999 and I believe, as Ursula LeGuin says in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, that: "It is good to have an end to journey towards; but it is the journey that matters, in the end." The staging of any journey is very important: the sights, the smells, the being there. Intense focus, intense seeing, a keen sense of place and self-in-place. These things were gifts from the authors I've mentioned and so many others. And when they weren't there, I found that I was providing the vividness of the visuals myself. I'm sure others have found this on re-reading books they loved. We often enoble less than truly wonderful works with our own visual imaginations. We make up the shortfall in what we need them to be.

As for Australia, it's still very much a blank canvas in so many ways. You cannot have a continental land-mass with a mere 18 million people, most living on the coast, three quarters of the population in thirteen cities, and not feel a sense of emptiness, of possibility. You cannot help but project onto that emptiness. It's not often talked about, not often formalized that much – "Oh, look at all that emptiness! I wonder what effect it's having on my psyche?" – but it makes for a constant, deep-down exercise in the act of becoming. One of the oldest, most stable land-masses, yet barely two hundred years old in anything like a European sense of history. An ancient place, newly in the present, made for futures. And now I've formalized it too much.

As you say, some authors, White and

Ballard among them, have said they wanted to be artists. I too would love to be a painter. I respond so well to visual stimuli and collect images all the time, do sketches, photograph streets, sunsets, vistas, found objects. Artists often provide triggers for stories. It's no coincidence that Surrealism – originally a philosophical, literary and socio-political movement – should be remembered for its striking imagery. One of the first stories I ever wrote involved a journey into Dali's *The Burning Giraffe*, a way of resolving the painting. Just as Ballard's "The Screen Game" appears to be set within Dali's *Metamorphosis of Narcissus* and "Cry Hope, Cry Fury!" within *Sleep*, I like to resolve images that have moved me. A prime example of this is my story "No Hearts to Be Broken," inspired by Shaun Tan's wonderfully mysterious painting *Sea Butterflies*. I obtained his permission, completed the tale, and had the thrill of seeing both story and painting appear in *Interzone* 117 (March 1997), apparently the first-ever cover for a professional overseas sf magazine by an Australian artist. Another Tan painting inspired my forthcoming book *Blackwater Days*.

VI: You have also had a long-standing association with artist Nick Stathopoulos, from his earliest appearances in the journal Science Fiction: A Review of Speculative Literature through to the present moment, when he stands nominated for a Hugo. The Stathopoulos connection has clearly played a role in shaping the vision behind your Tom Rynosseros cycle of stories.

*TD: Yes indeed. From when I first started my Tom Rynosseros tales in the '80s, I've had the honour of having Nick visualize that world for me, giving it the right air of mystery and possibility. It's a rich cross-pollination. We also shared the heartbreak of having *Omega Science Digest* fold one issue before it ran a twelve-page feature on the Tom Rynosseros future fully illustrated by Nick.*

SP: Where do you stand with the Tom Rynosseros series at present? Your most recent work has tended to be mainly horror fiction; does that mean we won't be seeing so much of Tom in future?

*TD: A fourth Tom book is complete, awaiting a publisher. Because they're linked story collections, I've had the usual resistance from the marketing people at the larger imprints (the Book Club edition of *Rynosseros* in the US notwithstanding). They want novels, preferably formula, the thicker the better. But the book is done and Tom's adventure will continue as long as the journey feels*



right. He is one of my ways of re-discovering and re-choosing my life.

My recent published work only seems to be horror (it's more terror and disquiet than horror, but oops, that's labels again) because that has drawn the most public attention recently. I could argue that if you look at storylines, many of my Tom and Wormwood stories involve fear, disquiet and "horror" as well. The boundaries of category in storytelling are inevitably false ones, fixed prices on variable goods.

VI: It's currently trendy in Australia to stress the "internationalism" of sf and decry any kind of nationalist flavour, but you have always believed that the Australian context offers unique perspectives which most writers would be rash to refute or ignore. You've stuck to



your principles by continuing to advocate this view, and the immense popularity of the Tom Rynosseros stories confirms your wisdom in this. Your more recent stories tend to be more urban in setting, but here again you are pursuing the grail of that ineffable Aussie gestalt, aren't you?

*TD: Yes, I am. I do feel that the best fantastic literature produced in Australia often catches the essence of something quite unique, though this isn't meant in any nationalistic sense whatsoever. I feel I am a "psychic national" of Arizona, for instance, and I'm sure there are Arizonans who feel the attraction of this place. Given the liberties of Surrealism, science fiction and fantastic literature in general, and the exhilarating ride we're all taking through the late twentieth century, you quickly realize there is only ever space, time and identity. Who, Where, When, What. We use these things to work at Why and How. We're governed by paradigms, elaborate mindsets made by reason and imagination, by light, locality and experience, a sense of being *here* and not somewhere else. So, without presuming to identify any such unique qualities too rigorously (labels again), I feel a sense of being *away* from the rich mix of cultural horizons which did, yet at the same time did not, foster our modern Australian experience, of being on the edge of an ancient emptiness, of observing at a remove all that other places have been and are becoming. There isn't the weight of history or class or expectation. You feel you still can matter, that most of it is ahead of us. Few places allow that now in any dynamic sense. So while it's lonely and incomplete, even never quite enough, it's also very liberating. There are vital and fundamental contrasts and dual perspectives: new/ancient, sophisticated/primordial, liberated/isolated and so on. We are culturally so far from what made us, but without the anguish that marks, say, a South American culture like Argentina. The perspective is quite unique. In storytelling terms, the resulting dynamic and style can (if not always) be special.*

SP: Later this year the first critical monograph on your work is to appear. The title – The Eternal Yes: The Affirmations of Terry Dowling – strongly stresses the affirmative side of your work. Are you happy with this as an initial critical response to your writing?

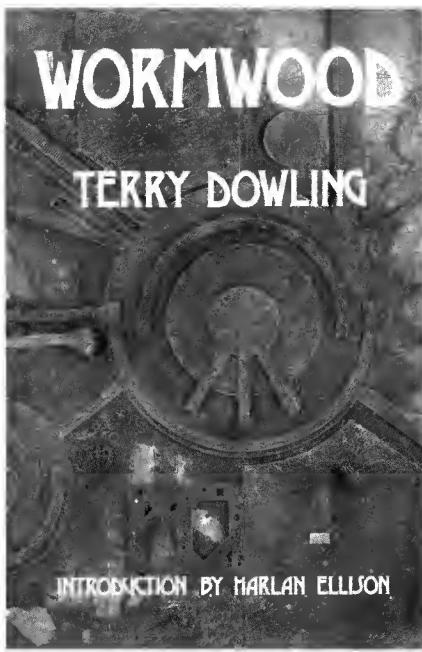
TD: I'm delighted and honoured. I don't believe we create with our egos, but ego, poor misguided creature, tries to take credit whenever it can. I've never sat down and planned my stories as affirmations. That's the gift

of the self to the self. Again, Patrick White comes to mind. Such a crusty, curmudgeonly man, but, oh, the constant return to the transformation, the transcendence, the becoming more you find in his work, themes pursued almost in spite of himself.

SP: But you must have some reservations about the notion of "affirmation"? Surely "exploration" and the kind of inability to affirm that arises from the open-minded approach of the explorer is a constant feature of your work. When so much of your work resists closure, how much can it affirm?

TD: I'm probably the wrong person to ask about this. We don't need to be told again and again what we do wrong, how we fail, how we mean nothing before oblivion and an oblivious cosmos but those fleeting things we leave with others with a desperate "Remember Me" attached. It's always there, so insistent. We need to know that, sure, there's entropy, there's the Big Crunch and the sun burning itself away, but, hey, look, we're getting by, man, we're doin' fine. We're made for here and, despite the wrongheadedness, the ecological abuse and opportunism, the cynicism and desensitization, there's still the green surge and renewal and kinship and possibility. The way we're designed shows me that. Sure, you can reduce compassion to the brain firing a certain way, reduce rapture to hormones and genetic predispositioning, but look at what we do in spite of those practical explanations. Some writers are, by nature, bleaker, more reductive, more pragmatic, less generous, more existentialist, many of them more instructive and effective as futurists. I'm about a different task, or rather the same task in a different way. I guess I'm more like Stubb in *Moby Dick* when he says: "I know not all that may be coming, but be it what it will, I'll go to it laughing." Maybe that's why I have an affinity for the Fool card in the Tarot and all that it represents, and why two of my major characters, Tom Rynosseros and Hollis Green, have lost their memories and are charmed fools rediscovering their worlds. To paraphrase a famous T.S. Eliot quote about the proper end of all our exploring: you *must* go home again.

VI: A story like "Stoneman" is a good example of the way you generally resist closure in your stories. The storyline is self-contained, with the central predicament resolved, but throughout the story there has been a strand of imagery which likens the Stoneman to a kind of Christ-figure, and the reverberations of this echo far beyond closure. This is obviously a difficult question, but for you as



author what do you think (or hope) such "echoing reverberations" achieve?

TD: Again, it makes our lives larger if only by reminding us of what our humanity has been and what it can be again. In the smallest acts we echo the greatest. Once we grasp why the Arthur mythos endures, the Robin Hood mythos, those of Sophia and Christ, Mary Magdalen and Gandhi, we begin to find resonances, pleasing echoes, in our own smallest acts. We're told the unexamined life is not worth living, yet, often because of ego, we get in the way of knowing ourselves, meeting ourselves, tuning ourselves. We have to go home, we have to reconsider, we have to re-make for closure to work. It happens at the self, not necessarily in the story. The story can stay open, resonating, eternal. The reader no. Arthur, too, could only sit in one chair at a time. Everything I've just now said is both nonsense and simplest truth, both I must emphasize, depending on where each of us is in the journey.



SP: Where do you stand now in relation to your career as a literary critic? You have moved on from co-editorship of Science Fiction to editorial adviser, you've been the regular reviewer of science fiction, fantasy and horror for The Australian newspaper for the past ten years. You are presenting writing workshops and accepting commissions for critical work. Do you wish you had time for more work in this area? Is the critical passion still there?

TD: It certainly is and I still enjoy doing it, but I do see being a critic and reviewer as creativity gone elsewhere, because, along with songwriting, that's where I placed my creative energies for so long. Not putting myself on the line with stories, afraid to fail, afraid to be what I truly was, I placed it into literary criticism. It pleases different parts of the mind, the well-turned line, the well-crafted argument. It's more ego-driven and too often becomes an application of John Fowles' fascinating notion of Nemo: if I contain, limit and fail you, I win and extend myself. I transcend. A critic must be better than that: a teacher, an explainer, a fair witness. Being a critic uses the ego; being a storyteller uses the self. They both use words to do it. Oh, but the responsibility!

SP: What are you working on at present?

TD: As well as *Antique Futures: The Best of Terry Dowling* appearing in time for this year's Worldcon, I'm well into a Wormwood novel and really enjoying the journey. I finished *Blackwater Days* in 1996, a stand-alone "novel" in the true sense of the word – seven linked stories designed as parts of a single work, concerning the inmates and staff of a mental hospital in the Hunter Valley northwest of Sydney. That should appear early next year. Three of the seven pieces have been released for publication so far: two made it into the Datlow/Windling *Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*; one has appeared online at *Event Horizon*. I also have a Tom Rynosseros novel waiting to receive a final draft.

VI: And are you still following your habit of doing your writing longhand, in a café, over a cappuccino or two?

TD: Yes, indeed. I like to write longhand, key in, print off, then resume longhand. I spend an hour or two in a coffee shop every day, scribbling away on the café terrace. I find everything is fluid in script. As for cappuccino – like the microchip, the carousel and editors who think like Lorenzo di Medici, it is one of civilization's great accomplishments, proof of a future for the race and a golden tomorrow. [2]

The Bicycyle Net

Kate Orman

Toni's bike bumped along what had once been a road. Civilization, she thought as she steered around a sapling, had not so much fallen as gone for a bit of a lie down.

Gum trees lined the edge of the bitumen, trunks crowding into the distance on either side. The sky overhead was a hot and dusty blue. The undergrowth was as dry as tinder.

Two days ago she had been on the outskirts of Sydney – a vast forest peppered with miniature suburbs. The crumbling towers of the Central Business District still jutted up through a tangle of trees. She had stocked the bike's luggage box with parts and equipment for delivery – containers of tiny tools, bagged computer chips, the transparent plastic scrawled with hand-written labels.

When had the last car squeezed along this road, winding down the hill? Maybe before she had been born. But fallen trees had been dragged to the sides, the worst potholes filled with gravel.

Now she could see the irregular rows of crops planted through the forest, broad flat leaves close to the ground. The temperature was falling as she dropped into the pocket of rainforest. There was water around, hidden somewhere amongst the trunks.

When the road forked unexpectedly, Toni cruised to a stop and leaned the bike against a tree while she took a long drink from the water bottle, sucking hard to draw the fluid through the filter.

She turned idly, scanning the forest with eyes and ears. At her last stop, there'd been more reports of bushrangers, a farmer's shed broken into, most of the tools stolen. He'd probably end up buying them back on the black market.

There was a rifle clipped to the frame of Toni's bike, where she could grab it even while she pedalled. Once upon a time the bushrangers would have made off with cattle and horses. These days they couldn't do better than a well-maintained Johnson's Patented Overcycle, its luggage box crammed with spare parts, and a computer with a portable Node.

She flipped open the computer and brought up her map of the area. It said turn left. She ran a finger over it until she saw the waterfall, the creek that ran downhill and past the town. The right fork of the road must wind uphill

until it reached the miniature hydroelectric plant.

She straddled the bike again, launched herself down the hill. The wind was hissing in the trees, hissing past her ears. There, a clearing in the dip between the hills. And there, the low houses, solar panels flashing on the roofs. Cook, the town she'd come to save. A handful of children were running out to meet her.

Toni had brought sweets from the city – bite-size blocks of bitter chocolate, barley sugars in twists of paper. The kids couldn't have been more excited if she'd been dressed in rainbow robes, dispensing magic tricks from a velvet bag.

Instead she wore a scuffed leather jacket over a loose shirt, stained jeans, walking boots, a broad-brimmed hat crammed over cropped black hair. Her sun-roasted face was marked with a white stripe of zinc cream, smeared onto the bottom of her dark glasses. The sweets came from a dust-spattered backpack.

Cook was a just a row of houses beside the road, backing onto the bush, and a large cleared area surrounding the concrete hump of the Node. Without the Node, they were farmers, and nothing more. With it, they were students and psychiatrists and novelists.

"Great bike, miss!" shouted the kids, buzzing around her. She let them touch the slick metal of the Overcycle's frame, peer at the handmade components: the complex gears, the GPS tracker built into the handlebars.

"That's a great bike!"

"Can I have a go?"

"Go on, miss, please?"

Rescue came in the form of a woman with a bad sunburn, not much younger than Toni, wearing shorts and a singlet. "Sorry, you caught us in the middle of the siesta," she said, holding out a hand. "Good to see you. I'm Gloria Turner. I'm Cook's technician."

"Toni Flower. We can get to work as soon as I've unloaded the bike and had a shower."

"Right," said Gloria. Other adults were emerging from the houses, or from the forest, carrying gardening tools. "I'll be putting you up. I've got a spare room. Hope that's all right."

The townspeople were clustering around her, touching her arm or shaking her hand. A greying man in

rolled-up sleeves said, "I'm Stan Holm – in charge of the agroforestry project. Glad you're here at last."

"We're miles from civilization." A woman laughed nervously. "So's everyone, these days, I suppose. Our nearest neighbour is two days' walk away."

"Not much faster, on the bikes we've got," said Holm, glancing at the Overcycle. "And no electric utility truck. We've never been cut off like this before." He patted one of the girls on the head. "You don't realize how isolated you really are."

"Not to worry," said Toni. "Nodes are prone to failure, but it's usually no trouble to get them up and running again. With a bit of luck, everyone will be back at work again tomorrow. And school," she added, making the kids groan.

Most of the houses in Cook were conversion jobs: decades-old cottages, exteriors carefully painted and maintained to look the way they had last century. Only the solar panels, open like moths on the roof, gave them away. There were only a dozen houses, but it was still good manners to call it a town.

Front lawns had been converted into gardens. Gloria had two apple trees, was growing tomatoes and runner beans. She wrestled the luggage box into the house while Toni secured her bike to one of the trees.

She double-looped the plastic-sheathed chain around the trunk, threading it through the frame, and padlocked it. After a moment she knelt down, pulled a wrench out of her toolbox, and set about removing the front wheel.

Inside, the house was like any other: white walls, polarized windows, cool air. Gloria looked at her in surprise as she rolled the dusty wheel into the kitchen. "It's the bushrangers," explained Toni. "You can't be too careful."

Gloria poured lemonade. "Everyone's as frightened as hell," she said.

"Of course they are." Toni gulped the sour stuff. "God, that's better." Toni put down her rifle and toolbox on Gloria's kitchen table, next to the terminal. With the Node out of action, the screen was blank. "Listen, I've been doing this for four years. I've visited dozens of towns like Cook."

"You hear about the ghost towns," said Gloria. "Places with no Node. That's where the bushrangers are supposed to come from."

Toni was shaking her head. "I've never once encountered an unfixable problem."

Gloria nodded, but her sun-pink face was taut. "Did you know Stan is on the national agroforestry council?" Toni shook her head. "Without that Node, we're nobodies. We're just farmers. We can't do our jobs, we can't order anything, seeds, medicines, nothing." Gloria slapped a hand on the fridge, twice, agitated. "We're not part of civilization any more. All we've got is what we've got right here."

The kids were playing in the cleared patch when they got back to the Node, driving their bent-wheeled bikes around on the dirt and shouting out missions to one another. Old models, showing rust, scavenged from the empty cities. "Look, miss, we're in the Bicycle Net!" shouted one of the girls.

"Keep up the good work, people," Toni told them. Glo-

ria's tension dissolved into a smile.

The kids' parents had disappeared into the forest. Birds were calling, the dusty ground was thick with the shadows of trees. Late afternoon and very early morning were the best times to work. As a kid, Toni had been up before the sun, trowel in hand, adults and children working together through the coolness.

"If you don't mind," Toni said, "I'll go through the basic diagnostics."

"I already ran them three times," said Gloria. "You should do them again, though, of course, maybe I missed something. I didn't want to go any further until you got here," she added. "It hasn't made me very popular."

"You did the right thing," said Toni. "If there's a component that's cactus, you wouldn't have been able to do anything about it without a replacement."

Gloria relaxed. "Thanks," she said. "You know, I'm really glad you're here."

She had brought the plastic bag of spare parts, safely tucked into her pocket. You could order anything over the net – anything except the hardware that kept the net going. That was a Bicycle Net exclusive.

One continent, two centres of industry. Miniature factories in Brisbane and Sydney. She had spent six months of her apprenticeship peering through magnifiers at computer components, hand-turning Overcycle parts.

"Let's crack this thing open," said Toni.

Gloria took out her keys.

Inside, the Node's bunker was a rough-walled, narrow chamber, too small for Toni to stand up or stretch out her legs. She slid inside and sat cross-legged on the floor.

The Node proper was the standard fat plastic box with fold-out controls. In its reinforced concrete bunker, it could withstand a bushfire that would level the town, not to mention floods and minor earthquakes. The satellite dish, a cup of collapsible foil, was installed on the roof of one of the houses.

From there, Cook was connected to the human race. That didn't mean quite as many people as it once would have... but in small communities around the globe, people were trading information on agriculture and medicine, publishing research papers and poetry, buying, selling, writing love letters. Without an Overcycle or a 'plane, you didn't travel – but the world was still within reach.

If this town really had lost its Node, it would be Toni's job to advise them to evacuate.

A console unfolded itself from the side of the Node. Toni booted it up. It immediately powered down. She tried again. The net logo came on, an ID, and then – blank. It had shut itself off.

Gloria was a hunched silhouette in the doorway. "I ran all the standard tests on the motherboard," she said. "Couldn't find anything."

"The power supply?

"It all checks out. I tried everything I could think of."

Toni spent an hour going through the basic diagnostics. Gloria squeezed inside the bunker, passing her tools. They worked in silence.

Gloria was only a trainee technician. The Bicycle Net

sent the technicians out on the road as soon as they finished their training. Once you had that Overcycle, you no longer had a home town. Your place of work was everywhere.

Besides, the Net wanted to make sure they kept their customers.

Finally Toni said, "You didn't miss anything. The boards, the connections – everything's fine. Let's check out the startup software."

She plugged an auxiliary terminal into the Node, pulled up the boot software. After a moment, the terminal came alive. "Looks like everything here is all right too."

Gloria couldn't sit still, claustrophobic inside the tiny hut. Her curly black hair was gelled with sweat. "Listen, I didn't want to mention this before. But do you think it could be sabotage?"

"Who'd want to sabotage Cook?"

"Bushrangers? It just doesn't make any sense that we can't find anything wrong. The whole point of Node design is that even a trainee can fix them." Gloria gave a bitter laugh. "Bit of a bloody failure there. What now? Are we going to have to pull the whole thing apart?"

"It should be cooler here," said Toni suddenly. "Did you check the environmental controls?"

"That," said Gloria, "I didn't think of."

It was a long walk uphill to the hydroelectric dam. The trees to either side of the dirt road had been strung with Johnson's Patented Fireflies. The little lamps had spent all day soaking up the sunlight, and now they were starting to glow as the evening fell. Christmas, thought Toni.

Overhead, clouds were gathering. They stopped to watch them for a few moments, wondering if these ones would unload their rain.

"I still think it could be sabotage," said Gloria. "It just seems kind of specific. Shut down the environmental controls, and the Node automatically powers down to avoid overheating. Make sure you shut them down at the dam, not at the Node itself."

"Maybe," said Toni, staring off into the darkened trees. She'd brought the rifle, slung it over her shoulder. She'd never seen a bushranger.

The creek wasn't much more than a trickle. "What do you do for power during the really bad part of summer?"

Gloria said, "Switch to batteries and pray. The solar panels generate about half of what we need. I've been working on plans for a wind power system, but I don't really have the expertise. We'll be up the creek – if you know what I mean – if we get another year when the rains don't come."

"Don't worry," said Toni. "It's not supposed to get any worse."

Over Toni's lifetime, the average global temperature had risen by two degrees Celsius. For Australia, that meant bushfires and droughts, sizzling January nights. When the rain did come, it often turned into floods that buried whole towns in mud.

The models had predicted it all. But they didn't explain why the Earth's population had fallen... and fallen... and fallen. At first the reasons had been obvious, the malaria and cholera, the riots and wars. But the numbers had

gone on dropping. Nobody had predicted that.

The models insisted that it wasn't going to get any worse. The deep ocean hadn't heated up nearly as much as the simulations predicted. The human race was down to a billion, the family car was a rusting memory, and every possible inch of the planet was jammed with trees. But it wasn't going to get any worse. Might even start getting better, given a century or so.

The dam was a wall across the creek, the low water level exposing the concrete. Downstream, the edges of the riverbed were dry, the centre carrying a constant, thin flow. The kids were swinging on a rope, kicking around in the shallow water.

Toni had seen dozens of set-ups like this. Each town aimed for self-sufficiency in electricity and food. Other resources, like the little medicine factories, were dotted over the map. Only the Bicycle Net was centralized, sending technicians and couriers out from Brisbane and Sydney, its twin hubs on the east coast.

They walked across the wall, Toni hanging onto the railing the whole way. She followed Gloria down an aged ladder, the metal rungs flaking onto skin and clothes. There was a door at the bottom.

The control room was badly lit, noisy with the constant gush of the trapped water, the grinding of turbines. Gloria tried to get the door shut. "It's warped."

Toni shouted, "Which ones are the Node's feeds?"

Gloria showed her. They crouched down. There were three cables – the main power feed, a separate feed for the environmental controls and the other auxiliary systems, and a backup for the main power feed. Toni shone a flashlight into the middle socket.

"What's that?" Gloria shouted.

Thick slime was hanging down inside the socket. "Kill the power," said Toni. "Let's find out."

It took them a few minutes to pull the front of the box free. Toni hauled herself back up the ladder, found a long, thin stick. She used it to probe around inside the socket, tugging out lumps of the slime and shaking them onto the floor.

"It stinks," said Gloria.

"Well, it's been here for a week," said Toni.

She pulled the stick out, dragging something with it. "For God's sake!" shouted Gloria. "What is that?"

Toni looked at the molten mass hanging off the end of the twig. "I think it used to be a slug," she said.

"It's been years since I saw one of those giant slugs," said Gloria. "I stepped on one, once, when I was a kid. Twenty centimetres long." She held up her hands to show the length. "All of its guts shot out through its side."

Toni stuck out her tongue. "That's disgusting."

"Everybody's going to be so... relaxed," said Gloria, as they strolled down the hard dirt road. A cold breeze was gathering strength. "They're probably logged on already. I'm just really sorry you had to come all this way to dig an electrocuted slug out of the works. Fried!"

"Gloria, that's gross," Toni laughed. The town was in sight, the solar panels glittering in the last of the light. "It's not a problem. I'll do some routine maintenance

tomorrow morning, and then cycle out in the afternoon."

"I was barefoot the time I stepped on that slug. It took me half an hour to scrub the slime off."

"Shit!" shouted Toni. "Where's my bike!"

Toni ran the last metres to Gloria's garden, stumbling through the vegetables to the apple tree. There was no sign of the Overcycle. Even the padlock was gone.

"Bloody hell," said Gloria. "I'll get Holm. We'll search for it. We'll search, Toni." She turned and ran down the street.

Toni stared at the tree for another minute. She walked into the house, as carefully as a drunk, and switched on Gloria's terminal. The Node was up and running. Gloria had twenty-seven email messages.

Toni sat down. When Gloria came back, she was still sitting there. "Toni?"

Don't worry, she wanted to say with a laugh. I'm not going anywhere.

Only Gloria and Holm stayed to guard the town. The others spread out on foot through the forest, rode their rusting, ordinary bicycles up and down the roads, taking shotguns and rakes.

Toni had visited so many towns like this, little specks of life, human outposts in a world that was turning into an empty forest. Carbon sinks slowly sucking up the greenhouse, locking that see oh two away in branches and leaves.

She had raced the trainees up and down the useless runways at Brisbane airport, taught them the ins and outs of their Overcycles. She had camped on a cliff looking out across the Bass Strait. As the clouds had formed and changed, she had found it easy to imagine that she was the last human being left alive. The next morning she had pedalled into a town of three hundred and fixed their fried motherboard.

The Internet and the Bicycle Net. Side by side in a world waiting for its fever to come down.

Gloria made Toni drink a cup of sweet black tea while she got on the net and reported the stolen Overcycle. Messages went out to the neighbouring villages, to the thinly spread network of police. Thunder crackled and muttered overhead.

Despite her assurances, they were probably still terrified that they'd be taken Offline. It had happened last year, for only the second time in the Bicycle Net's history. A town in Victoria had tried to force a visiting technician to stay. Their Node had been cut from the Internet. There wasn't a town there any more – not in Cyberspace, and not in the real world, either.

"They broke in," said Gloria. "I can't believe it. Into my house. They didn't take anything except your front wheel."

"I'm due in Gundagai in three days," said Toni.

"You'd better send a message to the Bicycle Net," said Gloria, pushing the terminal towards her.

Toni shook her head. "Not yet."

"You're right," said Gloria. "We'll find your bike. You'll get it back."

"Listen," said Stan Holm. "You can stay here until then. We'll take care of you, and that's a promise."

"You've got a home," said Gloria.

Toni sagged in front of Gloria's terminal. Sleep wouldn't stay with her. Dawn couldn't be far off. Nearly time for all good farmers to be struggling out into the rain, doing their morning chores.

Despite herself, Toni looked at bicycle catalogues. She pulled up a calculator on the screen, worked out how many years' worth of pay it would take to order a new Overcycle, have it brought to Cook on the back of a courier's ute. The electric trucks ran on sunshine, but they took forever to go anywhere. And the couriers charged by the day.

Thunder snapped and walloped overhead, rattling the glasses on Gloria's shelf. Poor little Gloria, who had oohed and aahed over Toni's toolbox and portable terminal. Who would just love to run away and join the Bicycle Net. Who wasn't going anywhere, because she had ties and obligations to this one tiny spot on the map.

The rain started as a hiss, built up to a steady pounding on the roof. Toni watched it for a while, face pressed to the double glazing.

Maybe she could borrow a bike from one of the nearby villages. It was crazy thinking. Without an Overcycle you'd never make it over those decomposing roads.

She chewed at a fingernail, turned a frosted glass round and round. She would get out. Years of cycling had made her body tough as wood, her legs hard as iron. She'd fill up her backpack, take her tent, and walk back to Sydney. All the way back to Bicycle Net Central in Brisbane.

It would be a lot easier to stay here. For a while. She pulled up Gloria's schematics for the wind power scheme. There was enough electronics work here to keep her busy for years, designing, installing, maintaining. She could run a consultancy over the net.

At least the townsfolk would never need to worry about their Node again.

Toni stood up hard, knocking her chair over. She bumped into the wall, found the door handle, stumbled out into the storm. The rain fell in sharp lines down her arms.

Bushrangers would never have risked coming into town in the middle of the day. It would have taken them half an hour to saw through that chain. The children would have seen them, even if nobody else did.

Toni found herself struggling through the rain, feet digging into dirt relaxing into mud. The path wound slowly up towards the hydroelectric dam, barely visible in the flickering light of the Fireflies. The creek was swelling in the sudden rain, a rushing noise somewhere down the slope.

She had brought her tools with her. Her tools, and her rifle. She would find a way to destroy the thing. A fire, she thought as the lightning crashed overhead, snapping the trees. She would cut connections, break dials, set a fire that would gut the place.

Then they would have to give her back her Overcycle. Send her for help. She would never come back, never come near the place again.

From somewhere up ahead, echoing through the fury of the rain, she heard someone laughing.

Toni broke into a run, landed on her knees in the mud. She pulled herself up. She was almost at the dam. She

staggered into the trees, but the rain and the darkness were keeping her well hidden.

She looked down the slope towards the dam. There was movement down there, lights. It took her eyes several seconds to make out the shapes.

She saw her Overcycle. It was strung with a lei of Johnson's Patented Fireflies. The pale light splashed down the wall of the dam as the bike wheeled up to the thin concrete ledge. There were figures all around it, Fireflies strapped to their arms or heads. The creek's trickle had become a rain-fattened flow.

Push it in! They were going to push it in! It was some sort of sacrifice! They were going to push her bike into the dam!

Toni exploded out of the trees, ran and slid panting down the slope.

One of the figures hoisted itself up onto the bike, letting out a yell that echoed madly back from concrete and forest. The bike began to roll downhill towards the dam.

Toni reached the group just as the bike shot out onto the dam, swooping along, gathering speed. The boy on board was standing up, feet jammed on the pedals, the lights attached to his body thrashing around. He let out another yell, and it bounced and repeated from the wall of the dam, over and over.

The other children were looking up at Toni with the huge and paralysed eyes of kids who know they're in serious trouble.

The boy caught sight of her as he was wheeling the bike back across the dam. For a moment, she thought he was going to turn around, make a run for it. But he hesitated for a moment and then kept coming, slowly. None of the children moved.

"We found it, miss," said one of the girls.

"It's true, miss!" said a boy. "We found it in the forest."

I wonder how it got there. Toni didn't say anything.

"This morning. When we went up to do the weeding. We found it."

The boy handed the bike over, not meeting her eyes. She turned and started to wheel it down the hill.

She wanted to jump aboard, race down the path to Gloria's place, grab her stuff and go. But there was no way she could ride through this slush, she could barely push the tyres through it.

The kids were following, a little way behind. Had they taken the bike, found something to saw through the chain? Maybe they'd been playing with it the whole time, got scared when the villagers started their search.

That would be what the villagers – what the townsfolk would say. They'd be deeply apologetic about their delinquent children. Toni remembered what it had been like to be one of those rare, spoiled kids. You could get away with murder.

Without firm proof, the Bicycle Net would never take the town Offline. The good people of Cook would pack a picnic lunch for her, watch her go with relieved smiles and haunted eyes.

Toni hid the bike in the forest, near the town, well away from the cultivated area. The kids didn't try to follow her into the trees. The rain kept her hidden as she

walked back to Gloria's cottage.

She went to the kitchen, carefully packed her luggage box, making sure that everything was there.

Her jeans were starting to stiffen with the mud. She pulled her jacket off a chair. Gloria's terminal wasn't on the table. Toni frowned, peeked into the bedroom. There was no sign of her host.

Toni ran back to the bike.

It was starting to get lighter, despite the downpour. If the kids were up before dawn to start work on the crops, their parents were probably up in the forest as well. She had a few minutes before they started looking for her. It was enough.

She clipped the luggage box and the rifle into place, wheeled her bike out onto the main road, snapped on the headlight, and pedalled off into the rain without looking back.

Someone was waiting for her at the top of the hill. Someone with a bicycle, turned sideways to block the road.

This is it, thought Toni. She slowed, pulling the rifle free from its clip. Her headlight picked out the shape through a curtain of droplets.

"It's me," said the figure. "It's Gloria."

Toni got off her bicycle, wheeled it up to her, still gripping the rifle. She looked around.

"I'm by myself," said Gloria. "No-one else knows you're here. I woke up when you left the house."

"You followed me?"

"I saw you coming back with your bike. I knew you wouldn't be hanging about."

"No joke." Toni realized. "You want to come with me."

"I've been rehearsing," said Gloria. "Want to hear the speech?" Toni waited. "Take me with you. Please. We've got to have a fully trained technician. We can't risk losing the Node again, having to rely on someone coming to fix it. That's why they – why we wanted to keep you here."

"Is that right," said Toni.

"I want to finish my training, and I need your help. Take me with you. Please."

"Do they know?"

Gloria shook her head. "They don't know you've got your bike back. Not yet." She waggled the handlebars of her bike. "It's not an Overcycle, but it's tough. It'll handle the roads."

"Did you bring a tent? Because mine's not big enough for two."

"Course."

Toni glanced down the road. "I'm not coming back here," she said.

"I know," said Gloria. "But I am. One of these days."

Toni got back onto her bike. Somewhere overhead, it was dawn. "Let's just hope the road isn't washed out ahead," she said.

Kate Orman has written several *Doctor Who* and *New Adventures* novels. This is her first appearance in *Interzone*. She lives in Meadowbank, New South Wales.

The Military Industrial Complexion

Anthony Morris

Redden always put on her war paint before she went to work, the exfoliant mites like tiny zircons devouring the night's dead skin before the bronzing powder and eyeshadow oozed up from her pores.

"You'll have to refill those eccrine glands," I said, slumped on my couch watching her smear a handful of krillgel into the finger-long hair at the top of her head, her close-cropped sides a mustard colour from the Guard's home-brand dandruff seal. "You're not still using that army surplus perfume Tucci gives you?" I sighed, nose wrinkling at the smell. The photocromic pigments in her make-up strobed briefly as she selected the day's face, settling on the usual cartoony salesgirl look with just a hint of military threat across the cheeks.

"It's what he likes," she said. "Why should I change?" She ran her ceramide-coated nails through the krillgel, sculpting it, pressing down at back and up in front, leaving an uneven part like morse code for "late for work" across her scalp. When she was done she shook her head sharply and a halo of moisture droplets appeared around her head as the gel spat out its waste. "Still coming in to see the war hero?" she asked. I nodded. "Then I'll see you at twelve," she said, kissing me on the cheek before heading out to her job as a scent sniper at Patton's War Surplus Body Salon, the lipstick print on my face reshaping itself to spell "Death From Above" as she walked out the door.

Tucci showed up via smellepresence a few hours later, a new trioxyceramide thermal blusher across his broad, bloodhound olfactory sensor-packed nose. "D-Day Dawson's Biolague Stimulating Body Refiner," he said when I asked about it. "Shrinks your pores, jams heat sensors.

How's it look?" He'd been a squad chemist in the 12th Exfoliators until he caught a cortex virus that wiped out his visual memory – his eyes worked fine, but his brain couldn't work out what he was seeing, so now he got around with some cheap dolphin subsonic sonar that set my teeth aching whenever he looked at me too long. The dolphins didn't give refunds and he'd never bothered to get it re-tuned: he seemed to enjoy being a pain to be around.

"Serious sex appeal," I sighed, "How Redden keeps you to herself I'll never know." Well, apart from you being her commanding officer, I thought. I kept my mouth shut: I may have been a civilian intelflora botanist, but while I was working at Patton's he was my C/O too.

"It's the sonar. Drives women wild. Get just about anything vibrating with this set-up." He paused, sniffing the air in my direction. "You're a real good friend to let Redden stay over when her room-mate's moulting," he said, the empty air telling him nothing had been going on between her and me. No surprise there: I liked her a lot, but she just wasn't my type – a childhood filled with too many war sitcoms had fixed me on a completely different kind of woman. Tucci took another sniff then faced me, and while physically he was on the shop floor down at Patton's my jaw started throbbing through dislike alone. "The rootputer's dried out, so guess what? You're coming in on your day off to fix it."

"I was coming in anyway," I said, barely hiding my annoyance.

Tucci sniffed the air heavily one last time, inhaling Redden as his image wafted apart. "Rosalie is due at

12.00. Show up at 11."

Rosalie was Captain Donatella Rosalie MM DSO, war hero, Military Pathoweenponry's swimsuit issue covergirl three years running, and ex-girlfriend of Second Lieutenant Tucci (judging by his heavy use of her "Stuka" carcinogen repellent aftershave he'd never really gotten over her). She was doing an in-store appearance that afternoon to promote her new MP44 line of biochaff radar jamming body spray. I'd been planning to go see the woman who'd single-handedly revived the helmet as a combat accessory for weeks: I'd had a major crush on her since before I knew that what I was feeling had a name.

The queue to meet Captain Rosalie already stretched out past Patton's mauve kevlar blast doors when I arrived at work, the more stylish fans giving my garish charcoal grey/insulation orange urbaflage uniform make-up a disapproving look as I forced my way inside. The shop floor was gloomy at the best of times, the overhead bioluminescent buds hidden by obsolete national flags and corporate banners drooping low off their stems, but with the make-up aisles packed with people sweating off last season's aggression-boosting blush it felt like the sauna of the damned.

"You're still using aluminium-based deodorant?" I muttered under my breath. "Haven't you people heard of apocrine gland modification?" It didn't take long to see how the rootputer'd dried out: one of the overhead vines had cracked, and nutrient soup was dripping down to splat thickly in a bucket already scumming over with wild wallpaper mould in a garish handgrenade motif.

My jaw started aching as I smeared on my uniform from the staff room trough. The smartslime's pattern had barely organized itself to match my face before Tucci pushed through the office curtain, yelling and sniffing the air hard. "You realize Rosalie's security people want all those gel-heads on the street brought in and filtered before they'll let her start? Repairs on the rootputer'll have to wait – you work crowd control now."

The crowd snaked their way down aisles lined with retro dumbcloth uniforms and razorpaint nailpolish bottles pulsing like bullet-shaped hearts as their contents tried to burst free. Most of the crowd were service providers – waiters, sales assistants, and mechanics all identical under their scuffed gyno/arteplast coated skin, juice-boosted muscles bulging where work rather than beauty required.

It took the arrival of Rosalie's squad of gangly combat supermodels to get the crowd into line. Seeing those slender statues with eyes of liquid pearl shamed the fans out of unruly behaviour like 14th century Catholics behaving themselves around nuns. I hadn't received the olfactory tattooing that denoted combat experience, and without that manly musk the models never returned my longing glances.

The table where the Captain would sit was set up in front of a huge palmleaf repo of the advertising graphic I had on my bedroom wall: her smiling and sipping a cappuccino across from a frowning Elvis, the young King a clear second in the sexuality stakes even before you saw her hand on a fat black propgun. Redden was standing guard by the table, a stubby shotbottle of Todd

Klien's "Depression for You" perfume in hand. Once the crowd was under control I headed down the relatively empty flashmascara aisle towards her, hoping for a close-up look at the main event. Halfway there a wave of dansom wool and cellophane skirted no-account executives brushed barefoot past me, long bonespur heels clicking: Captain Rosalie had arrived.

As she – "walked" isn't quite the right word for the way she moved, clad in rosepetal horticouture and gliding like a panther that'd evolved to some higher state – over to the desk, her bob-cut black cindyhair moving just enough to tell me it could move a lot faster if she was attacked, I was amazed at how normal she looked. I'd heard elite units had their teeth taken out and replaced with a microns-fine razor of calcium hydroxyapatite for that stylish gaunt look as they bit through their foe's throats, but when she smiled perfect human teeth gleamed, sending a twinge through my heart. She might've been smiling at Tucci like they'd never broken up, but her mimetic pheromones gave her a grin that was literally infectious, those fans with obsolete immune systems suddenly replicating her every facial expression.

After the crowd recovered from their celebrity shock they strained forward, baby-blue retinal cameras feeding the view back to Krupp/Redkin Dopplereiter memory grafts. Personally, I would've saved some Moebis drive space in case things got violent – it was that fashion shoot-out where she'd taken out the Kevbolla basement virus factory that'd first sent me falling for her – but I suppose the brush with fame was enough by itself for some. I'd be cloning the visuals from the store's security bulbs myself.

Tucci clicked his fingers to bring up the mic field. Everyone but Rosalie started rubbing their jaws the second he opened his mouth: "As the original MP44 broke new ground as the first short-cartridge purpose-built assault rifle, so too does its namesake's line of chaff body spray revolutionize the area of personal perimeter defence. First the mix of woody vetiver, spruce bark, heliotropin, beeswax, and freesia gently removes the layers of dead skin, then bonds them with the latest in slow molecules to create a radar opaque and thermally dead cloud that's the latest in defensive chic. But enough about this year's hottest product – it's time for the woman behind it to have her say. Whether you know her from her work against the Carcinoma Cult during the re-occupation of Milan or from her weekly show *Axesorize*, you know her or you wouldn't be here – Captain Donatella Rosalie."

She stood and waved the applause down before speaking in a voice that was reassuringly normal: "Harry is too kind. After serving two years together that speech could've been a lot nastier –" a wry chuckle rippled through the crowd "– but he's not that kind of guy. And I'm not the kind of officer who'd lead her troops into battle unprepared, which is why the MP44 is designed to render you invisible to anything up to and including the Messerschmitt 410J-6 'Hornisse', so –"

Tucci had been whispering to Redden since he'd finished his speech, and suddenly his voice vibrated through my earbolt. "Something's up with Redden -- you

handle the evac." Redden was already walking my way, head bowed, and she didn't slow as she passed me, taking the first turning away from the crowd. The bioceramic subdermal armour aisle was deserted and that's where she stopped, slumping to the floor. After a moment she looked up: there were a line of blotches across her forehead, red mosquito stings capped with yellow pus bubbles, and more were flowering as I watched.

"You see what that bitch's done to me?" she snarled. "She's given me pimples."

"Who?" I said distractedly, still staring. I hadn't seen anything so disgusting since her room-mate started shedding her sebum-devouring bio-membrane mask over dinner and some of the placenta flakes fell in my chicken soup.

"Your war hero Rosalie. She slipped me a batch of military-grade acne so she could make her move on my man."

"Captain Rosalie gave you pimples," I said, unable to hide my disbelieving tone.

"Why not?" she snapped. "I've got glands pumping out a fleet of anti-viral mites that'll devour any prokaryotes a metre away, and that's before they hit what's crawling over my skin. Past that and my hydrolipidic film is bulletproof – you think it's just coincidence these came up while she's around?"

She took an Achilles "crazy quilt" camouflage scarf from a pocket and tied it around her forehead to hide the worst of the acne. "She's been giving him looks that'd melt Giroplast since she came through the door. Once you've massacred a couple of tastelessly decorated villages, slipping a skin condition to a rival is nothing. Hell, we've all done it." Unsheathing an evil coal-black bayonet, she ran a thumb along an edge scalloped with Chanel's twin C's. Frowning at the bloodless groove it left in her carbon-keratin skin, she slapped it against her thigh to re-power the blade's nanites, her full lips curving into a frightening smile. "But this is a game that definitely comes with a multi-player option."

She must've been moving to combat mode ever since the acne hit, but I didn't notice her body reshaping itself until she stood again, our eyes level for the first time. Her muscles had re-ordered themselves around her lengthening bones, pulling her up with a poise more relaxed and graceful than her usual military gait. Her lips were fuller, fatty cells reorganizing themselves for optimal body curvature, and her gold eyes with their rose-patterned irises looked at me from above knife-edged cheekbones. Her sebaceous glands had reabsorbed her salesgirl look, blusher and mascara draining away while her skin's chromatophores shifted and condensed until she had the pale, flawless complexion of someone who only tanned at night. Suddenly faced with a flawless production model of General Dynamics' GD-71 "Lynx," the fulfilment of make-up's age-old promise to remake its wearer anew, I was stunned.

"Did I ever tell you you're beautiful when you're angry," I mumbled.

She slapped the bayonet against her thigh, too deep in thought to hear me. "Plausible deniability. That's a prerequisite. When's the rootputer due back on line?"

"In this weather," I said, "maybe three hours?"

"And if we only wanted the phage alarms up? The stomach bacteria ones?"

"I could do a bit of pruning and splicing, bring that up now..." I trailed off, hoping I'd jumped to the wrong conclusion. "But without Rosalie's DNA we can't send a targeted alarm, and if we can't dial her direct an alert will purge everyone's alimentary canals. We'll be knee deep in vomit."

"Targeting's no problem," Redden said. "You know the scent Tucci likes me to wear? It's her scent. He kept a pheromone decoy sample from when he was her squad chemist." She paused, reading my stunned look. "Hey, he liked it," she said defensively, "he wanted me to wear it, and if it makes him happy that's fine with me, okay?"

All of a sudden she couldn't meet my eyes. "You're going out with a man who wants you to smell like his ex?" I said.

"So what?" she snapped, annoyed, "who doesn't do little things for their partner?"

"It's not a little thing," I said. "Not when your partner relies on smell to tell one person from another." She didn't answer, glaring at me with new petal-etched eyes. I sighed. "Give me the scent. For a professional killer, you sure have a self-esteem problem."

"Big talk from the man in love with a spokesmodel," she said, as she pinched the skin at the side of her neck and a bullet-sized object popped out. She cracked it open, coughed in it once, then handed it over, the ectoderm vial sweat-slimy in my hand as I went to work.

I accessed the rootputer via one of the inventory terminals in the stock room, hitting the tap root memory core and working out along the protoxylem exarch fibres till I found the nutrients I needed. Someone had carved "No guts no glory" into the corner of the leafscreen, browning out the dicotyledon pixels there so half the time I was re-routing blind, but eventually I had the sap flowing to the alarm systems, teasing the apical meristem into growing back the dead connections.

It didn't take long for the fructose-soaked buds to sprout, and once the web had reclaimed the dried-out connections it turned itself on, citrus-yellow pinhead stamen-sensors flowering on the walls and ceiling. Tiny mayflies hummed between them, their long feathered sensory appendages tasting the air, reporting what they found with every flower touchdown. I opened the scent-vial and called a pair over, watching as they skated the surface tension across the fluid's surface before dipping their sensors, leaving behind tiny wakes as they flew off to input the info that would greenlight our claims of attack.

"Not a problem," I said, reading the results off the leaf. "We are cooking with methane in a highly oxygenated environment."

The leafmonitor extended its fronds, dicopixels fanning out between the joints to go widescreen as the image cut to a live feed from the signing floor security bulbs. The crowd was still thick, a mix of queuers yet to meet Captain Rosalie and used fans milling purposelessly behind the cordon of models. Tucci stood next to her, and while most of the customers started rubbing their jaws or temples as they reached Rosalie her gorgeous smile never faltered.

Triggering the Captain's internal purge would require something more definite than just a general phage alert, which was why Redden had coughed a dose of DRNY's "Blunderbuss" Flu into the scent sample. I waved up the purge menu and highlighted stomach expulsion. "No sir, her's was the only targeting DNA held by the flu that triggered the alarm. Yes sir, that's why I selected her alone for the purge," I rehearsed sadly. On the leaf I could see her look up suddenly, as if hearing someone call her name. "Sorry," I said softly, and hit purge.

Rosalie sat upright, a puppet pulled tight on invisible strings as the rootputer barged into her system with a priority command. War Hero or not she was still a member of the Guard, and here Patton's commands carried a full colonel's weight. We'd told her she'd caught something her internal sensors couldn't detect, and that particular something was something she had to lose before something very deadly happened. Or something like that.

What we saw was Rosalie doubled up and clutching her stomach just as planned. But instead of throwing up whatever we'd set off, it seemed to burst inwards, black bioceramic morphogenic sap flowing out under her skin and buckling it up like pine cone scales. As it flooded up her slender neck, her hair grew long and barbed, a silk mass of wire antennae running from her streamlined skull down her new broad back and wasp waist to an impossibly long and curvy pair of legs like pistons tipped with grey diamond claws.

"That's some major sub-dermal armour..." Redden said, awestruck.

"You think maybe she's over-reacting just a little bit?" I said, carefully backing away from the terminal as, on-leaf, Rosalie – now jet-black from head to toe and easily two meters tall thanks to a combat mode not even slightly concerned with human beauty – sniffed the air with a nose that would cut your face in half to kiss. On-leaf, the crowd was too surprised to move, Tucci slapping his ears like he couldn't believe what his sonar was telling him, leaving Rosalie the only thing moving in the whole picture. Moving our way.

"Come on," I said to Redden, still staring admiringly at the leafscreen.

"The Panzerjager IV..." Redden said to herself, not hearing me. "No-one said how beautiful it'd be..." Rosalie walked out of range of the bulb, and the picture swung back slowly to show the signing area, civilians and Guard alike starting to hurry after their altered idol.

With the Captain out of view Redden came back to herself. "Stand back," she said, suddenly blurring around the edges, her anti-viral mite field thickening up as her glands tripled their output to combat the coming threat. "We should –" she said, and then Rosalie was through the stockroom door, and the air between her and Redden flickered bright as their mites clashed.

Almost from the start Redden was coughing, shouting at me to run while I pounded away at the rootputer, trying to find something that would shut Rosalie down. Redden did her best and her best was pretty good, but she was on her knees spitting blood in less than a minute, her mites little more than dust against Rosalie's

winter range of offensive technology. And that was what saved us, for as Rosalie moved closer, her polished black lips spread in a razored smirk displaying now inhuman teeth, the signing crowd flowed in. Most of them had already negotiated correspondent deals with fashion networks, shouting questions sent to them instantaneously by foreign sub-editors, sending back their vision across the world.

Seeing them Rosalie stepped away, her grin fading to a charm-laden smile. "Later," she said to us with a voice that buzzed around the edges, then turned to face the adoring hordes. Yes, she purred in tones warm and human, this was an impromptu look at the Guard's winter look that would be officially launched three weeks from today in Milan. No, she couldn't speak for Major Easy, but she felt this was his most innovative design ever, and as she continued with her press conference Redden and I slipped quietly away.

Rosalie's unscheduled winter line preview grabbed her a solid halfday of prime publicity, leading to a promotion, a two-unit ratings jump for *Axessorize*, and a debriefing session in which she said so little about what really happened that our little tiff wasn't mentioned once in the military inquiry's final findings. What were mentioned extensively were my comments about Tucci having samples of Rosalie's scent in his possession, and while Redden's use of said scent was discussed, the fact that she had helped greatly in my (highly commended) response to the (still mysterious) attack had weighed heavily towards her receiving only a light reprimand while Tucci was posted to an eyeshadow refinery in Jarkarta.

I found out later it wouldn't have mattered what command I'd given Rosalie, purge or otherwise: the Mark IV is incompatible with previous operating systems, and any attempt to impose subconscious orders is taken as a hostile attack. It's not the kind of fact about her I would've bothered to uncover myself these days – seeing her turn into something two steps left of human put a very permanent end to my crush – but Redden won't stop talking about her. I think she's in love, and it's a condition that's going around a lot these days.

Seeing Redden in action has shown me a side of her that I've fallen for hard, and while she might be too busy staring at Rosalie to spare me a glance, I'm looking hard for a sample of that pimple virus Rosalie used on her. Once I find it, I'm grafting on a little r-pheromone love potion of my own and sending it straight to her heart. Some say beauty's only skin deep; as long as that skin's programmable-chromatophore capable with a bullet-proof hydrolipidic film, that's as deep as I need to go.

Anthony Morris spends most of his waking hours working as a film reviewer and freelance journalist, which only occasionally involves being paid, and has had stories published in *Aurealis* and *Eidolon*. He says "I have discovered over the years that telling women you're writing a novel is easily the most unsuccessful chat-up line ever. (It's tentatively titled *Call It Real*, by the way)." He lives in Geelong (Melbourne's low-rent industrial neighbour).

Stormy Weather

Peter Friend

One night last summer, there's this thunderstorm over in Broken Hills. Though I think maybe not a real storm, coz I see many thunder and lightning, but no clouds, no rain. A pity, coz no rain for many days and me garden is thirsty.

I not think much of it at time. But next morning, I wake and hear clanging and whistling, and I smell hot steel and coal smoke. And, just faint, lightning. Oh ho, I think, oh ho.

I climb up, and on me bridge is one of them six-legged iron camels what DronForge scroths make. It squeal and blow lots of steam, then a little iron door on its side open, and out peer a little bearded scroth in a hooded



white robe with many smudgy stains.

"Good morning, mister glon, sir," she say, all polite like. "I believe you ate my father six days ago."

"That possible," I say. "What he look like?"

"Grey hair, big nose, squinty eyes, tall – well, tall for a scroth."

"Yes, I remember him," I say. "Try to pick some of me best red duskblooms, he do. Until I hit him. But no, I not eat him, not yet. I pickle him in vinegar."

"Oh," she say, and frown. "Why?"

"For eat in winter. Pickled scroths is much tasty on frosty nights," I say.

"Oh," she say again, and chew her lip like she has a think. "Could I see him? Please?"

Then I has a think, coz this no question anyone ask me before. "Suppose so," I say, coz why not, and also coz I still smell that lightning somewhere close.

So I go down and look through me storage cave. First I forget where I put that pickle jar but then I find him behind big barrel of smoked toes and wings. When I climb back up to bridge, I see camel lie on road, and little scroth pull many bits out big doors on back.

"Camel sick?" I ask, putting jar down careful.

"No, no, it has retractable legs to simplify cargo loading. I invented it myself." She push a lever and camel blow steam and smoke and all legs squeak and grind and it stand up, and then she pull lever back and it clatter and screech and lie down again.

"Much useful for a wee shorty like you," I say to be polite.

She not look pleased, is about to say something, but then she see jar and she open her mouth and say nothing at all.

"I've never seen a jar big enough to fit an entire scroth before," she say at last.

"I has an even bigger one for horses, but you has to bend their legs to fit them in," I say, but she not seem interested, she just stare at her pickled father.

"We weren't all that close," she say. "He disapproved of me being an machiner – always wanted me to be a coal miner like a 'proper woman'. But anyway... um, where did I put it..." She pull a little silk scroll from her robes and read aloud. "I, Vonur, on behalf of the noble and devout ThodClan of DronForge, do most respectfully and humbly beg your merciful return of the mortal remains –"

"What?" I interrupt.

Vonur sigh and put scroll away. "Sorry. My brother Caalur wrote it for me – he always talks like that. I told them you wouldn't be impressed. They sent me here to ask if you'd trade for my father's body, or at least some of his skeleton. My clan are Orthodox Farchiners, and the ancestor bone ceremonies are very important to us. I've got twenty seven generations around my neck right now." And she show me her necklace, what is made of many pieces of bone all carved pretty, some much old and worn. I look in jar and see her father also wear one, what I not notice before.

"If you only need skeleton, can I chew flesh off first?" I ask, coz scroth bones just stick in me teeth anyway.

She sit down and her face go a funny colour. "We'd

prefer the whole body. If that's all right with you, sir. I'm sure there's something here you'd like." And she point to all bits she pull out of camel, and then step behind camel like she afraid of me.

Vonur seem nice so I look at her bits, though in me experience, glons and scroths mostly value things different. Sure enough, there's lots of shiny metal discs and sparkly bits of coloured rock – I know some folks is keen on it but I meself see not much point. And there's many swords and rings and kettles and bracelets and other metal bits, as you expect what with scroths being underground folks and much good with things from there. I pick out a big cooking pot and ladle, but leave rest, no good to me.

Then I see she's a smart scroth after all, coz there's also sacks of seeds – brindle and spotted ratseye and needle corn and slime lotus and also others I not see before.

I tell her this is much good and she smile and run out and drag what look like a long black snake with metal levers on one end. She lower snake's other end over bridge into stream and then she wiggle levers. Nothing happen for a bit and then suddenly water squirt out and she keep wiggling levers and water keep squirting out and me obalyne roses get a nice needed water.

"It's an irrigation pump. I built it yesterday especially for you," she say looking much proud, and she hold it out to me.

A water squirter sound most clever to me, whatever she want to call it. I wiggle levers and give me shadow ivy a water, and then me minium trees and me ird hedge. It squirt much good, until I wiggle levers harder to squirt away to me snake seedlings and a lever go snap.

"I triple riveted the whole thing, really I did," squeal Vonur and run behind her camel.

I pick her up most gentle, but she start to cry when I carry her down to me storage cave and has a look through me jars. "It a most nice water squirter," I tell her. "Can you make a bit stronger one, better for glons?"

"Yes, anything," she shout, "Please don't eat me."

I pat her on head. "I only hurt people what hurt me plants," I tell her as I find jar I look for, other one what has a pickled scroth in it. "You a nice scroth. I trade you seeds and cooking pot and ladle and new squirter for your father and also this here scroth. Yes? You bring back empty jars when you bring me new squirter?"

"Yes, sir, on my oath as a Thodclan Machiner," she say, and touch her necklace to her tongue. She stop crying and wipe her face on her hood what make it even more smudgier. "Who's the other scroth?"

"I not know," I say. "You not want extra one?"

She shrug and say thank you yes. We go back up and I put jars and her other bits into camel and she climb quick inside it, and much steam and clang and away camel trot. In fact, it go so fast it nearly trip on a rock and some bits fall off. I shout to Vonur but I think she not hear me coz she not stop.

When I walk there, I see bits is soft black rock what scroths feed to their iron animals. Perhaps bits fall out of camel's mouth.

But among them is also a small branch with leaves and two berries. For moment I think Vonur has broken

branch off tree, perhaps even from me garden, and I much angry at her and think I chase her and teach respect for plants, and then I will have three pickled scroths in me cave.

But I smell lightning smell again, and I see branch is lightning burnt not broken, so I not blame Vonur but am still sad for tree's pain. Then I see that leaves move some if I touch them, and I know this is from most blessed tree of all, a tree what walk and talk. I think branch must be from Malgrin, coz he only treefolk I ever meet or know, and he live in Broken Hills where is thunderstorm.

So I scrape off burnt bit careful and put branch in little jar of budding broth. Not likely to save it, but still I must try. And I pray to Goddess, and watch clouds for reply, but see none.

A hand of days later, I again see Vonur's camel and also other DronForge folks. They ride camels (some alive, some iron) all heavy with sacks and boxes and baskets. First I think it just another trade caravan, what often cross me bridge on way to and from wherever, so I just watch to see nothing trample or eat me garden as they go past. But no, they stop a little away and tie up alive animals and then everyone and Vonur's camel walk to bridge.

There's scroths in white robes and some tall grey fluffy folks. They all ignore behind them two sand jugglers what drag a big sack.

Vonur's camel lie down and out she climb and also another scroth what look a bit like her.

"Greetings, most noble glon, sir," he say. "We respectfully implore your gracious indulgence, beseeching that –"

"You must be Caalur, what write scroll words for Vonur," I say before he confuse me too much, and he smile then frown.

Vonur open camel doors, and there's me empty jars and a new water squirter what look stronger than old one I must say. And she show me her necklace what has a new shiny bone carved in swirly lines.

"I told everyone what happened, and about all the jars in your storage cave," she say. "They all want to trade too."

"Oh," I say. "I has no more pickled scroths now. I give you all last time."

"What of my daughter Tymar?" ask an old scroth. "Vonur brought me back my other daughter Fiskor's body in a huge jar. Do you recall another who looked just like her? They vanished while travelling this way last winter."

I has a think. "Oh yes. I eat her. Much nice, much sweet flesh."

"You're a monster," he shout at me.

"Yes," I say, a bit puzzled.

"Why did you kill them? What did they ever do to hurt you?"

"Not hurt *me*, no – hurt me garden. I find them sitting under minium trees, laughing and eating leaves of many plants."

"Killed over a salad," he shout, and start to weep.

"All plants is children of Goddess," I tell him. "We, all people, must care for plants – a most bad crime for any to hurt them." But he not listen. Scroths often not listen when you tell important things, I notice this.

"Not even a few bones," he mumble. "How can I

mourn her without so much as a finger bone to carve?" And he reach quick into robe and pull out a steel crossbow. It go zing and a little arrow poke into me chest. "Kill the glon, kill him," he yell.

Everyone scream and shout and try to hold him down. I pull arrow out, coz it hit a bone and not much deep, and everyone scream and shout many more and many scroths run away, but not old scroth with crossbow coz I hold hood of his robe. I also see Caalur not run away, he hide behind rock and whisper to tall grey folks, what stand and watch like also sand jugglers.

"Why don't you go away and leave us decent folks alone?" old scroth shout and try to beat me with crossbow.

"Bridge is mine," I say. "I build it for garden, not for DronForgers always stomping everywhere in boots and hooves and metal toes. Why not all you cross stream at another bridge and leave *me* alone? All you go away now. I has no dead scroths, also no dead grey folks coz I not see you ever before."

And I let old scroth go and he run away. But grey folks not move away none. They just smile, and I not like their smiles.

"You are correct, sir," say a tall one with a high raspy voice. "As far as we know, we of the shoden have never had the honour of dying here. We are mere travellers, humble philosophers and scholars – we search not for corpses but for knowledge. When the scroths spoke of your remarkable garden, we wished to see it for ourselves. And truly, its magnificence exceeds even its reputation – I am astonished to see duskblooms flowering in so arid a climate. We are honoured to meet one so dedicated to the noble art of horticulture." And they bow and nod and smile and peer around, but they seem maybe to not admire me plants so much as look for something.

"Thank you," I say anyway, coz I not understand some of words, but I know "horticulture" is fancy talk for growing plants.

Shoden walk all around me garden. They much careful, yes, step on paths only and not touch plants; but still I not like it or their all pretty words.

"What a enchanting blue snakewort," one say.

"Look, driffle bugs pollinating skaniol cactii," say another.

"I do believe that is a treefolk cutting. Quite a extraordinary sight."

"Who'd have thought snake could grow so well at this latitude, and in such poor soil?"

They not lie, no, yet I believe them none. I not sorry when suddenly there's a smell and they crumple their noses small and step back some.

"Dead jugglers, we trade, yes?" ask sand jugglers, holding open their sack, what is full of dung. It smell bad but juggler dung make roses grow most good and I know I has many dead jugglers below, all dried and salted and ready to eat. So I run down to cave and grab an armful and climb back up quick.

I see shoden and Caalur walk away and I is not sad to see them go. But now other scroths is walking back, all holding arms across chests, and I not know why, so I quick give dead jugglers to alive jugglers and they leave most happy, chewing on dead juggler toes and chuckling.

"We came in peace, we would leave in peace," say old scroth what before shoot me. His eyes is red and his voice shake but he stare straight up at me. "My attack on you dishonoured myself and all my clan. For that – and that alone – I ask your forgiveness. We are civilized people." And he touch his bone necklace to his tongue, then take a shiny metal disc from his robe and lay it at me feet. All scroths one by one do same, even Caalur, though I think they not want to, and walk away.

"I not want your shiny metal," I call to them.

"And we didn't want our clan kin murdered. Life is a bitter wine, glon," shout old scroth but not look back.

Scroths and camels and jugglers and shoden now all gone, and day is quiet again. I put juggler dung sack in me cave, and then I look up and notice little treefolk branch is gone from jar.

I am much much angry and run after scroths and camels and jugglers and shoden, what is nearly out of sight now.

I run fast and when I get close they see me. Scroths not try to escape – they all pull crossbows and point at me but not shoot. But I is following faint scent of lightning and it not lead to them. Jugglers is running away from me on all fours most fast and squealing, but lightning smell not lead there either. Shoden ride on alive camels in many directions fast but I follow smell and chase just one. Maybe they not know a glon run much more fast than any camel alive or iron.

Soon I catch and bite head off camel and bite head off shoden and find treefolk branch safe in a box and am happy. I carry all back to bridge. Scroths and camels and jugglers and shoden watch from away and say nothing.

That evening, I pray to Goddess again, and sunset is full of warnings. Shoden meat taste sour and I spit out, but camel make a good meal. I sleep curled around treefolk branch. I not sleep well.

Next morning, all scroths' shiny metal is gone from road and there instead is a sack of fresh juggler dung. Say what you like about sand jugglers but at least they is honest.

I put treefolk branch into sun and pour more water into jar. I stroke leaves gentle, but they move only a little and I think maybe they wilt more than yesterday and two berries some darker. I am afraid for branch and I pray some.

But no clouds, just hot frown of morning sun. I use water squirter and give good drink to all garden. When I finish, I see three camels in distance. They come close and I see riders is a shoden and scroth Caalur and a many-armed spiky worhg, and I am most angry.

"You want your dead? Yes and go now away, thief," I shout, and throw nibbled shoden corpse at them.

Shoden look down from camel at dead other and then ride over it, crunching many of bones, and stop still a little away. "Hral'le'lugh was a thief and a fool. I am neither. Tell me, glon, do you believe in magic?"

"No," I say. "But I find things happen just same no matter if you believe in them or not."

This make shoden smile with many teeth. "A most excellent point. We shoden don't believe in magic either; nevertheless we can't ignore such power. We're unable

to use magic ourselves, but many other races are so blessed. Even the scroths take pride in their earth runes and daemon hooks and jhezakraal, for all their claimed distaste for 'unnatural lore'." And I see Caalur nod and scowl at these words.

"I not care," I say.

"Oh, but you should. Because plants too have magical powers. Your beautiful duskblooms – their nectar is prized in the Ghoroon Archipelago as a cure for black spine fever. The citizens of distant Fugris ward off evil by daubing their snouts with a paste of fazdrone milk and ground minium leaves."

"No one hurt me minium trees," I say. "Goddess –"

"Yes, yes, your devotion to the Green Goddess is as well known as it is admirable," say shoden quick. "Forgive my clumsy words; I meant only to illustrate how many peoples value plants' powers, however misguided their reasons may be. To give another example – and one perhaps more relevant to you – throughout the Broken Hills, the talk is all of some poor treefolk called Malgrin, injured by a suspicious lightning bolt. And from the scroths of DronForge, we hear that Caalur's sister was struck by a small branch falling from the sky, nearby and at just the same time. To her, caring only for spanners and steam pressures, it was no more than kindling, and she thought little of it. But other wiser heads realized its significance at once. And now, by kind fate... we see you have a dead treefolk branch in a jar."

"Not dead," I shout.

"Soon if not already so. Look at it – curling leaves and drooping twigs. To you, good for nothing but compost. But to me, or rather to my good friend Caalur here, that simple dead branch would be worth – well, take your pick."

And Caalur and worhg open boxes and sacks, and I see many nice things – snake and grapple seeds and honeymoss and wrinkly osslin bulbs, even a little darowleaf growing in a blue clay pot.

I pick up branch in jar, and stroke leaves again, and again they only shiver weak, and I know shoden speak truth. For first time, I notice branch is straight, and about length of a scroth arm.

"You want carve it into a wand for making more magics," I say.

Caalur grin. "The finest of all woods. Provided one stays far from treefolk, for the sight of such a wand angers them greatly." And he stare most hungry at branch.

"Branch still alive," I tell them, and stand in front of it. "Your words is all mist and glistening, and I not trust any what love magic so."

Shoden sigh and smile no more. "Alas, we have no time for such sentimentality, glon. Tagh, take the branch from him. Kill him if you must or wish, but do not damage the branch."

Worhg wiggle spikes and stare up to shoden, then over to me, then shoden again. "Most noble lady, thou hired me as a bodyguard, and I will guard thee with all my strength and skill. But if thou instead wish a glon killed, thou will need a dozen like me, all with long halberds and the best scroth chainmail, and wagons to carry away the eight of us with broken skulls and shattered limbs afterwards."

"Fool," she shout, I not sure at who. She draw a shiny sword with many eyes carved on it, and ride towards me. I stand and pick up a rock what is size of a scroth, and camel stop most quick and she nearly fall off.

"Do you think I'm the only one who wants that branch?" she ask. "In a few days, it will grace the hand of someone far less reasonable than me, you will be dead, and your precious little garden will be ashes and dust." And she ride away, close followed by worhg. As she go, her camel's feet smash her darrowleaf pot – no accident, I think.

Caalur shrug, then load sacks and boxes back onto his camel.

"It's only a branch," he say as he climb onto camel. "You not understand," I say. "You a scroth. I a glon." He ride away too.

I pick up darrowleaf what is left on ground, and see it is alive and whole, only pot is broken, so I replant it in shady spot on edge of stream.

I pray to Goddess again, and watch clouds but see only empty patterns. Until sunset, when I think I see Shape of New Budding, but maybe just sun in me eyes.

I sleep again curled around treefolk branch.

I wake just before dawn and see world is on fire. Everywhere me plants crackle and hiss and is swallowed in flames and sparks. Yet I smell no smoke and feel no heat, and no plants burn away, and so I know it is all magic tricks. I sit down to watch, treefolk branch safe in me arms, though I see last leaves has dropped off overnight, and it not move at all.

Fires vanish and instead I see a glon on me bridge. It look some like me but has big eyes and big smile and on its chest those swelled up milk glands like what scroths has.

"Hello, Caalur," I call, and funny glon vanish and instead there is little scroth looking annoyed.

"It seems I have again overestimated my powers," he say. "I had thought it a fair attempt at illusion, since none here have ever seen a female of your species."

"Yes, you has. I is a female glon," I tell him.

"Oh," he sigh. "Well, the good citizens of DronForge cannot mock me for that at least, as I was far from alone in my ignorance. Life in that town is quite cruel enough already for a scroth with a weak back and clumsy fingers. Look at me, glon – I have no skill with shovel nor pick nor anvil nor wrench. I cannot even ride a steam camel across the town without pipes bursting and rivets popping. I am reduced to casting merry illusions to amuse children on feast days, and living on the pity of my clan. Knowledge is not respected in DronForge, not unless it concerns alloy melting points or some such dreary practicality."

"And then shoden arrive," I say.

He blink. "You are no fool, glon – there too we maligned you. Yes, the shoden admire knowledge above all else, albeit they are never slow to also exploit it. One like me, a raw talent in magic, could be a valuable resource to such people. When Vonur returned home one day with our father in a pickle jar and a tale of being struck by a twitching branch, I knew this to be my life's chance."

"I still not give you branch," I say.

And Caalur stop talking, what is good for his words is too long, and he wiggle hands and his eyes roll back and he make a face like he eat bad meat and want to dung. And a little insect hop out his nose and fly to me shadow ivy. I look close, coz some insects like driffle bugs is kind to plants, but no, this one try to nibble leaves so I squash and eat it and it taste nice.

Caalur still make strange face. "Without that branch I am only a poor magician, but even so, I have learnt a few skills over the years. That insect was called a locust. Ever seen one before?"

"No. They is crunchy," I tell him.

He giggle. "They do not hunt alone." And I see two locusts crawl from his nose, and I still not worry, coz I kill and eat them quick. But then a hand of locusts appear, and then two hands, and then I think a hand of hands, and more and more but I has run out of numbers. I try to kill all but too many. They crawl all over plants, and each only make a small nibble but there is many nibbles and I see they will soon eat all of garden. I pick up Caalur and hold his nose, but still locusts come, from his mouth and ears and all over.

"You do not yet comprehend your fate, do you?" he ask. "This very evening, three Harlood necromancers will arrive by sand galleon, unless the winds are wayward. A caravan of Cla'drask are rumoured to be but two days' journey away. Even on my way here, a crimson scull stopped me to ask if I knew of any nearby glon's gardens. They will not stop until the branch is taken or destroyed. Give me the branch or kill me – I must have it."

I has a wee think, then I bite his hand off. As I hope, he scream and his face go normal again and all locusts fall to ground.

"Forgive me, Goddess," I call to sky, and I make Caalur watch and I most careful eat branch, every bit. "Go back to DronForge," I tell him. "Walk fast or you bleed to death. Tell them branch is destroyed. Tell them all go away."

Three strange scaly folk come past that evening, they sniff and peer all around and go away glum. And for some days I see strangers cross bridge though I think they go to nowhere. I ignore them and make busy with seeding trays and dung. And after some more days, I not bothered again.

What is good, coz I find treefolk berries in me dung and plant both most careful. And this summer, here you both is now, fine seedlings and growing fast, and so I tell you your story. Soon I send message to Broken Hills, tell Malgrin you is here. I think he be much surprised, much pleased.

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Teddy Cat

Catherine S. McMullen

We had been out as a family, Ma, Pa, Gran and me. Gran was visiting from the edge of town, and we had just taken Gran to see the tenth remake of *Titanic* as a treat. I looked at my parents as the electric car drove itself home. Ma looked as she always did, a bit of a mess because of all those bangles and necklaces and sparkly things in her dress. And Pa. Clean, neat and the exact opposite to Ma, he was one of the country's top scientists in cloning extinct animals. Gran had been a girl in the 20th century. I wondered what it must have been like with all those old style cars and pollution. The one thing that Gran, Ma and me really had in common was a soft cat toy with fur that had a strange feel to it. I called it Teddy Cat.

Teddy Cat was smaller than a real cat and had lost most of her fur because she was so old. Her eyes were red and white buttons, and she had been repaired so many times that it looked like there was more thread in her than skin, fur and stuffing.

At last we were home and the car was stopping. But there was no house! There were fire brigade androids spraying water on a lot of smouldering ruins. I just sat in the car and stared and stared.

What about my Teddy Cat? I suddenly thought. I dashed out and ran for what was left of the house but one of the firefighter androids caught me and carried me back, kicking and crying for Teddy Cat. Pa found a human fire captain and explained about the toy.

"It's my daughter's favourite toy, and has been in my wife's side of the family for years."

"Sorry sir, everything in the house was burned," said the fire captain.

"Everything is gone, what will we do, where will we stay?" I cried.

"How did it happen?" asked Ma.

"The house computer must have had a fault," answered Pa.

"What about Teddy Cat," I asked again. "Surely Teddy cat must have survived, nothing can destroy Teddy Cat."

"I don't think anything survived the fire, dear," said Pa.

"Why don't you stay at my house while your house is being rebuilt," suggested Gran. "You and Nick can share the guest bed and Jennifer can sleep on the couch with some old toys of mine."

"No thank you Granny," I said sadly. "Nothing could replace Teddy Cat."

"He used to be my toy as well you know," said Gran, "and your mother also had Teddy cat as a girl. Even my mother had him, and maybe even her mother as well."

"I know," I sighed. "It's just that neither of you had to cope with him being lost, you've only needed to pass him on."

It was a long drive to Gran's house. She lived out near the country and even had some sheep and cows in her big yard. I had only ever seen them in hygienic farms not out in the open like this. The house was ramshackle and big or at least big by my standards. We went inside and Ma started to get the bed linen out of the cupboard and Pa began to set out the couch for me to sleep on. Gran pulled me aside from helping Pa set out the couch.

"I want to show you something" she whispered to me. "Teddy Cat's toys. Mind you, she was called Old Stripey before she was given to me. I called her Teddy Cat to make her sound more modern."

She took me into a small room that had a bed, table and a small mantelpiece in it. On the mantelpiece was a small box and a brush.

"Teddy cat was kept on that shelf and that's the box where his old clothes are kept, and also his most precious possession."

She paused, getting her breath back, and then she lifted out the most beautiful yet strange thing I have ever seen. It seemed to be a strap of leather with golden threads, little jewels and fancy designs sewn into it, and

a strange hollow metal thing with slits on it which in turn had a small metal ball inside.

"What is it?" I asked Gran.

"It's a collar," she answered, laughing.

"What does it do?"

"You put around an animal's neck"

"Wouldn't it strangle the poor animal that was wearing it?"

"No it wouldn't, because it is fairly loose around the neck and unless they caught it on something like a branch it would be very safe."

"Why did they make them wear the collars?"

"Because cats hunt birds, and this thing, a bell, warned them to fly off. They attached the registration tags to collars, too."

"But DNA ID scans are easier."

"But they weren't invented then."

Life without DNA ID scans seemed to be just too primitive to cope with, as far as I was concerned. I thought of Teddy Cat again.

"Can I have a look at where you used to keep Teddy Cat?" I asked.

"Sure go ahead," Gran answered, pointing to a place on the mantelpiece.

I saw it at once, like it was calling to me. There was a nail sticking out of the mantelpiece with some hairs on it. I pulled the hairs free and held them up to the light.

"Has any other toy ever been here?" I asked.

"No, only Teddy Cat."

"Then these must be her fur!"

It was all that was left of Teddy Cat! At once I thought of Pa and his cloning work. Only last month Pa had cloned a Tasmanian Tiger from a skin in a museum as part of a project to revive extinct species. I showed the hairs to Pa.

"Is it possible to clone Teddy Cat from this?" I asked.

To my relief he did not laugh at the idea.

Instead he said "I could clone the animal that Teddy cat was made of, but it would most probably be a sheep or something else like that." I must have looked very disappointed for then he said "I tell you what, I'll have some tests done to find out what animal it was. If it is a cat I'll clone it for you. The poor pussy was most probably killed to make the toy, all those years ago."

The poor cat! I thought it was the least we could do for it, by making a clone and letting it have a nice life. The next day dad came back from the laboratory and said that the tests showed that it really was a cat. His assistant Dwayne was already working on extracting the DNA from some dried cells in the hairs. I asked him when I could look at the new Teddy Cat growing, but he answered that the birthing vat had no windows, and everything was automatic until the kitten was due to be born.

A few weeks later Ma came home from looking at things in the library. She looked quite worried.

"What's wrong?" asked Pa.

"You know how Gran is American?" answered Ma.

"Yes."

"Apparently there was a witch in her side of the fam-

ily three hundred years ago," she replied. "One of the early American settlers married an Indian girl, and their daughter became the witch. She had a familiar that was a stuffed cat."

Pa laughed. Ma did not.

"I've got a photostat from an old book in my bag." She rummaged in her bag and produced a photostat of a drawing of the witch and her stuffed cat. It really did look like Teddy Cat.

"Jennifer, go upstairs and tidy your room," said Ma. I left the room, but hid behind the door and listened.

"The witch was hung by some angry townsfolk," Ma continued. "They said she made the crops fail for three years in a row. She had one daughter, though, and she probably saved the toy cat and gave it to one of her children."

"It's quite a story," Pa agreed. "There is something about Teddy Cat that really affects your family."

"That's what I mean!" Ma said. "I don't think you should clone Teddy Cat's hairs. It might bring a curse on the family from that witch."

"Oh nonsense, there are no such things as curses and magic."

"Well something has been forcing the eldest children of my family to look after that thing for three hundred years. Now that it is no longer mine I don't feel so affected any more."

I was really frightened by now, so I went upstairs to talk to Gran about it.

"Your father is right, it's all nonsense," said Gran. "Your mother has forgotten what I told her about Teddy Cat. There is a family legend that Teddy Cat was once a real cat, long, long ago. She saved a little girl from a wolf, and when the pussy died some of her skin was made into a toy cat. Since then the toy cat has been passed on to the eldest children of each generation of our family to remind them of the brave cat who lived long ago."

When Ma and Pa had finished arguing I went downstairs and talked to Pa.

"The genetic tests showed that Teddy Cat was female, didn't they?" I said.

"Er, yes, so the kitten will be female too. How did you know what sex it was?"

"Oh I know lots of things," I said with a little smile.

The next day we all went to the laboratory for the birth of the new Teddy Cat. Dwayne, the laboratory nerd, said that the kitten inside the vat was very healthy according to the computer sensors.

"And it's absorbing about ten times more nutrients than a normal kitten ought to," he explained.

"It must be changing the food's energy into magical powers," said Ma, looking really frightened.

"Magical powers?" asked Dwayne.

"Must be a leak in the pipes," Pa mumbled.

"Hey I did some carbon dating tests on a bit of one of those hairs," said Dwayne. "It's mega-old, boss."

"Not now, Dwayne, we already know it's been in the family for centuries. Let's open the vat and get Jennifer's new pet out."

Ma grabbed my arm so tight that it hurt. "Don't touch

the little ones

Robert N. Stephenson

"I hear that things do not fare well for you, Ms Justice. I do hope you have not committed too much too soon?" the US/Japan Foreign Minister said as she walked across the cavernous room and sat opposite the already seated Australian Prime Minister.

"Early days yet, Nasumi," the Prime Minister answered, feeling annoyance at the Minister's, almost, casual manner. She moved her chair closer to the game board. "My offices have been informed of the problem and I assure you I will get Lewis' serum and break your embargo under my terms."

"Perhaps Ms Justice, but do not underestimate the little ones, the under folk." Nasumi frowned at the black faced chess board before her. "Are we to play chess again this evening?"

"That is my intention and please, Nasumi, call me Helen." Helen Justice brushed a piece of lint from her skirt. "I am amused that you consider the ants a part of our game."

"I consider all things, Helen. Your population relies too heavily on its implant technology."

"We lead the world in its use; all our people now have one," Helen said with a short laugh.

"Not all."

"The ants do not count, Minister," Helen snarled. "Their existence is tolerated: the non-enhanced have no place in our modern society."

"We have noticed this and it is one of many concerns we have at the moment." Nasumi replied.

"The ants are a necessary pest, Nasumi, nothing

more. Concern yourself with more pressing matters." Helen eyed the chess board.

"I consider one hundred thousand non-enhanced people living under the city a pressing concern, Prime Minister." Nasumi had become formal. "Do you really have no compassion for them?"

"The Christians help a few and I donate a little to their cause when I can."

"How noble," Nasumi said with a forced smile and slight bow of her head. "Shall we begin the game?"

"Let's." Helen looked up at the neat, almost porcelain Foreign Minister. "You know, Nasumi, that I have already won. Your opening move can only mirror last night's closing position. Check mate in three."

"Prime Minister, it is not wise to presume anything until the game has reached its natural conclusion. To announce victory in the middle of a battle can lead to defeat," said Nasumi in amusement. "Besides, I see no move that will force me to be dictated to, as yet."

The two sat in the centre of the classical room. Between its windowless walls a future hung in the balance. Antiques, gleaned from the late twentieth century, hugged the corners as if afraid to venture further into the political cavern.

Helen shifted in her padded chair and placed her hands comfortably on the chair's wide arms. Nasumi, looked on, composed, calm. Between the two officious women stood the ponderous, artificially intelligent holographic game board. Its flat black screen gazed up at the ornate glass ceiling, silent.

"I would be intrigued to see how you get out of this one, Nasumi – that's if you do. Would you care to increase the stakes to back your... confidence."

"To which game are you referring?" Nasumi lost her tight smile.

"You amuse me, Minister. There is only one game that is important." Helen motioned to the board. "Let us speak with action; I believe it is the loudest form of resolution. I also believe new negotiations will come from my victory."

Nasumi touched the control stud set into the arm of her chair and brought the game to life, the unusual looking pieces becoming animated on their even more unusual board. "You need only restore our fishing rights, Ms Justice. There is no need for this game..."

"Your move Nasumi."

Martin's lank, dark hair glistened with the day's sweaty tension and oil from the constant rummages of his hands. Slumped back in his chair, shoulders sagged, he looked far older than his seventeen years. "Can't we send Selo to negotiate with the Prime Minister?" he asked, his features skeletal and haggard.

"Selo's dead, Martin," the big man said as he shifted on his stool. "Besides, the government isn't interested in bargaining for anything."

Martin sat in a worn leather chair studying his grime-filled fingernails under the dim yellow lights of the hide out. "Maybe," he sighed. He looked up at the solidly built black African, "What about Helen, Silomi or Gunther?" They have contacts..."

"Helen's been captured and the others are dead," Rodney offered. "A System search team caught them together in the lab this morning. Helen gave up but you know Gunther."

"Bad tempered." Martin sighed. The news wasn't really a surprise, since he'd found out System had been called in. He sank further into his chair. He touched the vial case in his jacket pocket, his face shadowed under the oppressive hum of a dying fluorescent tube. "We've no one left to represent us," he said softly. "Is the Government really so shallow? Surely they know this will save millions." He patted his breast pocket again. "You know, I didn't develop the serum to be used like this."

Rodney nodded. "Unless the government restores fishing rights to US/Japan, I can't see it being used as anything other than a bargaining tool, Martin." His voice carried the sounds of defeat.

Outside in the alley the sound of city ants echoed through the hollowness of their corrugated iron fronted hide. The smell of thousands of stinky bodies permeated the air. At times Martin thought he could taste the stench of the ants.

"It stinks down here," Martin said wrinkling his nose.

"It's worse in the poorer districts," Rodney sighed.

"Can I set up a deal with the Christians?" Martin asked, his face brightened with a new possibility. "They'll do what's right."

"System would have them under net surveillance. Even if they agreed to negotiate on our behalf, System would pick us up within minutes of the handshake.

You'd have to be an ant to get through that net." Rodney stood up from the chair and stretched. "We had better get out of here, Martin, Helen would have been brain wiped by the SIM. Our safety down here is no longer guaranteed." Rodney leaned on the dented metal desk and stared down at Martin. "It's time to go. Leave the vial here. You've done all you can; let the System do its job. It's not worth getting killed over, Martin."

"You're right as usual." Martin pushed his hands down on the desk and lifted himself out of the chair, feeling every centimetre of his body scream with fatigue.

He heard a loud tapping on the front wall of the hide.

Rodney went for his scrambler as the frontage of the shelter erupted. Flame and light rushed in, followed by the boom of an explosion and screeching iron. Rodney dived over the desk and grabbed Martin by the collar. He collapsed, dead, crumpled head first into Martin's flattened chair. A streak of crimson glistened on the headrest.

The room filled with uniformed System officers who scurried about seeking shelter from return fire that didn't come. Silence fell on the group while the dust settled. Slowly, they began standing, muttering to each other as they lowered their weapons.

"Shut up!" bellowed a large cropped-haired woman. "Shut up!" she yelled again, as she marched through the debris and up to the front of the desk. Her red uniform marked her clearly as the SIM. She was anxious, tense.

The System's Intelligence Manager stamped around the desk and stared at the crumpled figure behind it. "Who's this?" she asked as she slammed one heavy booted foot into the side of the dead man. The force of the kick rolled him from the chair to the floor, his exploded eyes staring up at the concrete ceiling. She looked down on him with disgust. "Drysler," she barked.

Her aide stepped forward holding an implant-linked camera. He examined the body briefly before speaking. "This is Rodney Haiti, last known warren white/aqua forty two south, he is a... he was an employee of Lewis-Bio Labs."

The SIM looked down at the aide, then pushed him away with the flat of her right hand. "Martin!" she snapped. "Where's Martin Lewis?"

"He has yet to be located SIM. I ordered a widening of the perimeter net, he could not have gone far." Drysler held himself well back from the SIM. Nervously he scratched a phantom itch at the back of his brown haired scalp – anything to avoid looking into the two macro lenses that had replaced the SIM's eyes.

"Find him!" Sasha screamed to the ceiling like a howling animal. She flung the desk away from the chair with one mighty heave of her arms. Frustration enveloped the SIM like a storm cloud. "I want Martin Lewis standing before me within the hour. I don't care if you drag him in dead, just as long as you get him and that vial." She turned on Drysler, "Do you understand me? One hour!" She stormed from the room. She pushed through the sea of black faces, the sea of ants who had gathered around the opening to the ruined hide. Their faces were eager with the promise of salvage. Sasha didn't acknowledge their presence but she did hold her hand over her mouth

and nose as she elbowed her way through the crowd.

Drysler placed his right palm over his ear, encasing the blue plastic sea shell of the communications device. "Anything on the grid yet?" he said into small mic on his collar.

"Just finishing the re-positioning now, Sir, should have the area back under a net in another two minutes," came the reply.

"Check the back up, NOW!" barked Drysler. "Shit," he cursed as he pranced about the wreckage, a lone blue figure adrift in a sea of yellow uniforms.

Drysler steadied himself using his neural implant to reorder his thoughts into proper procedural action. "Eleven," he barked to a close officer, "you take Nine and Ten down to the Christian sector and put it around that Martin is on the SIM's grab agenda. Then clean this area, scan and log everything, including the dust if you have to." Drysler wheeled about and stamped towards the hole where the wall used to be. "Then get and search the tunnels," he said over his shoulder before he also disappeared into the dark shadows of the ants.

Martin stopped running. He panted, struggled to draw breath as he leant up against a damp tunnel wall. Moisture seeped through his thin jacket and shirt to wet his skin. Putrid air filled his lungs. He was surprised that he didn't see any ants during his escape but he could certainly smell them. He reached for the vial: it was safe. "Rodney. Thank you my friend. Thank you."

Over the pounding of his heart Martin listened for the sounds of pursuit. He pulled the silver stud of his cloaking device from his collar and threw it into the darkness, it was useless now. If Rodney hadn't activated the device when he dived over the desk he'd be in the hands of the SIM right now. Martin didn't like to think about what tortures that insane woman would put him through.

Martin was now alone in the underworld, the forgotten place for the non-enhanced. *What was it like to live without an implant*, he thought. He shuddered and wished for the open air of the plazas and the clean light of the stars. He suspected that on back-checking the video surveillance a trained technician would be able to detect his distortion aura leaving the building. The cloaking device was good at blinding implants but couldn't fool scanning equipment. He hoped to be well away from System by the time they checked the scanners. Using his memory chip, Martin, tried to work out where he was in relation to where he had been.

A recorded vision flashed in his mind. The tunnel he had just turned down was a green/blue. "Shit!" he spat in realization, he was beneath one of the Upper System administration buildings. He'd escaped into the teeth of the lion.

"The hour is up, Drysler," barked Sasha from a computer terminal's cramped alcove. "Do you have the vial, Martin?"

Drysler took a deep breath. "He slipped through our net by using a neural image disrupter – a cloaking device, SIM. The grid technician missed his aura while under instructions to reposition her equipment further back

from the commotion. We only picked it up twenty minutes ago while replaying the backup surveillance vid."

"This is not what I ordered, Drysler," The SIM growled, her glassy lenses still fixed to her small monitor screen. She was watching a game of chess between two politicians.

"Security has him located in the base tunnel under green/blue two-ninety-six-east," he said, ignoring the SIM's disguised threat.

"That's one of ours!" smiled Sasha. "I hope that you have taken appropriate action?"

"Yes. Martin cannot escape from the tunnels without passing a detection unit."

"How long?"

Drysler considered the question. Sasha was volatile. "We should have him within the hour," he said. "Dead or alive."

The SIM swung around on her chair and faced for the first time since he entered the room. "What have you done with the technician?" Her lenses sparkled under the bright lights of the room.

"Officer Nunan has now taken up a new position in interstate Jump Craft Services. I believe she is responsible for ticket and seat allocations." *He hoped Nunan would remember the favour.*

"Drysler!" Sasha yelled. "The punishment for dereliction of duty is immediate execution. Have you forgotten procedure or are you simply stupid?"

"Neither, SIM. The officer in question is a new recruit and was unaware of Lewis-Bio Labs's cloaking technology and I considered it harsh to punish her for my error in judgement." Drysler's stomach tightened. The SIM's next course of action was unpredictable.

"Very well, Drysler," Sasha said, rising from her chair and taking two short steps to stand towering over the aide. "Like you, I am capable of allowing flexibility in my decisions. For now I will stay your own execution for failing to produce Martin..." Sasha's face was calculating. "What have you to say to that, Drysler?"

"Thank you, SIM," he replied and touched his chin with his finger tips – the official salute of the System. Taking it on the chin as they say in the service. Drysler turned and left the small cramped room, walked down the long corridor and out into the street where his personal driver and transport waited to take him to green/blue two-ninety-six-east's plaza. The open-topped, three-wheeled electric car pulled out into the hush of light traffic. Drysler had some thinking to do.

The plaza ramp looked inviting in the darkness but Martin hesitated, staying well back from its ghostly white lights. By now System would have all exits under a net and armed officers would be swarming on the plazas. Behind him he thought he heard muffled voices over the hard beat of his heart. The tunnel echoed with the continuous sound of water that dripped from the walls and the soft shuffles of ants. Martin leant against the tunnel. "Trapped," he whispered.

"Who's there!" said a voice. It startled Martin into a fighter's crouch.

"I'm armed," said the neutral voice again.

Martin craned his neck trying to pinpoint the position

of the sound. His mind map threw up a grid showing his relative location to that of the voice. It had come from the base of the ramp. He crouched lower and crab walked to the other side of the tunnel, speaking as he moved. "I am unarmed," he lied. "I am lost, can you tell me where I am?" Martin flattened himself against the opposite wall and began a slow slide towards the ramp, his back against the same wall as his target.

"This is System Security. What are you doing down here?"

Martin knew this person wasn't security. System would know he was down here and would not hesitate in opening fire on him. Besides, he didn't get an implant tell tale on his grid. "My name is Martin and I am lost. I was trying to get to white/red nine," he said in his best innocent voice.

"Shit mate, you're a long way from there." A figure stepped from the underside of the ramp, its hand holding something dark in front of it. "Come closer," it called.

Martin rolled from his shadow and fired once with his scrambler at the now-visible form, then bounced back into a crouch beside the opposite wall.

"Ahhh!" cried the figure as it crumpled. "You bbbastard, you bbblody bbbaaaasssttarrrr..." it cried again, as the scrambler sent its victim into an epilepsy of jumbled thoughts and twitching muscles.

Martin scurried to the fallen figure and kicked the dark device out of its shaking hand, it thudded against his shoe and crumpled in on its impacted side. In the dim light Martin saw what appeared to be food pieces spill from the sliding object. He'd shot an ant.

"F... Fo... Food," jabbered the writhing figure.

Martin pocketed the scrambler and dropped down beside the ant. It was a young girl and around her throat she wore a voice neutralizer. That's why her voice was so banal he thought. He hadn't thought of ants having tech.

"W... w... w.why yoooo ffff..kkk nnnnng bbbastaard," she stammered again.

Martin searched her for ID and weapons – nothing. He sat down beside the girl and sighed with relief and waited for the girl to shake off the effects of the scrambler.

Ants looked just like people, he thought. But dirtier.

The girl, now recovered from the effects of the scrambler, sat with her back to the side of the ramp, staring at Martin, her thin arms hugged around her raised knees, her bare feet black with filth. She looked to be about thirteen but under all the layers of grime she could have easily been nine.

"Do ants have names?" Martin asked.

The girl snarled at him, ignored his question. Martin lifted the box that he had thought was a weapon and took a damp piece of what looked like bread from it and offered it to her. "My name is Martin and I really am lost down here," he said again. "I'm sorry about the scrambler, you said you were System. I panicked." The girl dipped her eyes in what Martin thought was understanding. "Can you show me another way out of here besides the ramps or tunnel exits?"

The girl shifted, eyed Martin with suspicion, then snatched the damp morsel and stuffed it whole into her

mouth. "I'm Barb," she said through a mouth swollen with food. "You gotta plant?"

Martin smiled at her. "Yeah, I got an implant." He tapped the back of his head. "Is there another way out of here, Barb?"

An explosion vibrated down the tunnel, the wall rang with sound as if someone was shaking a chunk of concrete in a can. Martin grabbed at his chest before he slammed face-first into the floor. Another boom of an explosion was followed by a loud ping, as something careened off the ramp's steel edge. Barb was showered with wet sticky slime. She dived flat on the ground beside the groaning Martin. Voices yelled from back up the tunnel and flashlights sparkled like stars in the darkness. Barb went to run.

"Plea...se," Martin grunted.

Barb halted, cursed, then dragged Martin to his feet. Another boom echoed along the tunnel, the air was alive with hissing.

"RUN!" she screamed at Martin as she pulled him along after her into the darkness. "RUN!"

Weapons fire followed them, dirt and slush leapt from the tunnel walls from all sides. Their pursuers were firing blindly. Barb pulled Martin faster through the darkness away from the light of the ramp until they came to a narrow crease of yellow light in the tunnel wall. Barb wiped a layer of water off a well worn touch pad and pressed her fingers hard against the surface. The crease groaned open a fraction showing a narrow passage beyond. Barb pushed Martin into the tight passageway and dived in after him. She cried out as something slammed into her leg.

"Move!" she screamed again, "Move!" The heavy door groaned closed after Barb palmed a large red push button on the wall.

Barb nudged Martin along the dimly-lit narrow shaft for a hundred metres before they came to a makeshift rope ladder hanging down into the tunnel from a ragged hole above. Darkness was deep through the wound in the concrete. "Up!" gasped the girl. Martin cried with pain as he pulled himself up the ladder, twice he paused as pain gripped his chest. "Hurry man!" hissed Barb. "Hurry!"

Martin passed through the opening and rolled sideways into a dark room. Barb pushed his legs aside forcing herself past him and into the room. She crawled to him. "Martin, Martin," she called shaking him.

"Yeh," he wheezed.

"How bad you hurt?"

Martin rolled onto his left elbow and tried to sit up but fell down. He didn't try again. "Bad," he coughed.

"Who's shootin' at us?" she asked as she pulled up the makeshift ladder and slid a board over the opening to plunge them into darkness.

"System." He coughed again, this time blood fill his mouth with its copper taste. "I'm Martin Lewis of Lewis-Bio Labs."

"You're the guy on the vids!"

"Yeh," he groaned then fell silent.

Barb was silent for a long time as she listened to Martin's

ragged breathing. She bandaged her bleeding leg with a filthy strip of cloth torn from her shirt and then drank some water from a plastic bottle she kept in a pouch on her waist. She edged over to Martin and offered him some of her water, he drank in gulps.

"ARRR! That stuff's putrid," Martin coughed, spitting the fluid out.

Barb backed away. "That's all there is down there, you either drink it or you die – simple mate, no choice." She watched him again as he struggled to move.

"Ant."

"Name's Barb!" She'd never spoken to a plant before. She hoped she didn't offend him.

"Barb then. I don't think I'm going to make it," he said. "I want you to do something for me."

"I'm not draggin' your carcass out of here," she snapped. "This is upside System, I ain't allowed on their plazas mate."

"Not that kind of favour." His voice was weak. "Shut up until I finish, OK?"

"Yeh." She wondered what it was like to have a plant in your head and what kind of dreams you had?

"I want you to take this vial to the Christians in yellow/orange twelve," Martin took paper and pen from his coat pocket then scrawled some words on it. With effort he pulled a solid plastic case from his jacket, put the note inside and handed it to the girl.

"I'm not goin' near no bloody holy rollers," she hissed.

"Shut up and listen. Take this vial to the Christians. Tell them that it's a gift from Lewis-Bio Labs, they'll know what it is," Martin forced with gasps, as pain swept across his face.

"What is it?" Barb asked, taking the case.

"A cure for the plague." Martin groaned.

"Bull shit," Barb said, opening the case and staring at the large blue vial.

Martin moaned. "Just give it to the Chris...tians." He pulled a wallet out of his coat pocket and flicked it over to the girl. "Give this to them as well, it's a funds access strip. Don't use it yourself, its implant...linked."

"You're really crappin' on me now," Barb hissed. She felt afraid.

"You don't have to believe me Barb, just take the stuff to the Christians."

"What's in it for me."

"Whatever you want." Martin's voice was a whisper.

A coughing fit ended with Martin laying very still on the concrete floor. Barb touched his face and felt its cold wetness through the layers of grime on her hand. "Martin... Martin" she shook him.

"I'm not dead yet," he whispered. He didn't move.

"Why will the Christians help?" she asked, after a moments consideration. She distrusted plants and liked holy rollers less.

"The Christians will help... because they can. They won't stand by and willingly let people die – regardless... of... their... beliefs." Martin said with effort.

Voces could be heard through the hole in the floor, they were muffled and still far, but System would certainly find them sooner than later.

"Go girl," Martin said, as he pushed a scrambler towards

her with a limp hand. "Use this... if... you have to."

"But..."

Martin wheezed then stopped breathing altogether. Barb touched his cold face gently. She snapped up the scrambler and sprinted away from the dead man, not sure whether to cry for him. She had never been so close to a plant before and was confused with the feelings that churned in her heart. Her pumping legs soon eradicated the thought. A short distance into the darkness she found another hole in the floor.

Sasha was standing when Drysler walked into the room, her hands were clasped tightly in front of her and her shoulders were bunched in tension. "The vial?" she barked. "Martin?"

Drysler touched his chin, "Martin has been found dead in a disused store room on the plaza level of green/blue two ninety six. One of the security officers reported that he had shot him while he was attempting to escape via an exit ramp."

"You said he was found on the plaza level?" The SIM's black macros sparkled clear death towards Drysler.

"It appears that he was assisted from the area by an ant, and I am afraid that due to the insignificance of ants we have no way of locating this individual." Drysler lowered his eyes and stood stiffly before the SIM.

"Did you recover the vial?"

"No."

"WHAT!" screamed Sasha. "He must have had it on him. None of the others were carrying it." The SIM walked in small circles around the cramped room mumbling curses and questions to herself.

"We need it, our Government needs it," the SIM said as she massaged her temples. "Without it we can't break the food embargo. It's our only tool."

"I am no politician SIM," Drysler added, then wished he hadn't.

Sasha turned on him, her fists clenched into tight balls. "Find the vial," she hissed. There was mist on her lenses. "You have two hours Drysler. And no waiving of penalties this time for failure."

Drysler nodded before backing out of the room. Once out in the corridor he ran to the exit and burst out into the blazing midday sun, his blue uniform reflecting its brightness.

"Where to, Sir?" asked his driver as he scampered into the rear of his car.

"Take me to the jumper field. While we are on the way call JCS and get Hilary Nunan to find me a seat on the next Adelaide jump," he said.

"Holiday or business, Sir?"

"Health reasons, driver," Drysler replied.

"Oh!"

"There might be a death in the family," Drysler added as the car pulled away from the System building.

"I understand, Sir." The driver said no more as they joined the traffic leaving the city.

Barb waited in the foyer of St Kilda Utility Complex yellow/orange twelve while an old woman went to get one of the Elder Christians for her. A short dumpy man with

unruly black hair appeared after a few moments and sat beside her on the visitors' lounge. "Sister Heather tells me that you have something from Lewis-Bio Labs to give to us."

"Yes," growled Barb, "but first I want something in return."

"You will be rewarded, I assure you." He looked down at her leg. "That looks bad."

"I'll live." Barb handed over the small case. "I want more than lousy soup and stale bread this time," she snarled.

The man opened the case, removed the note, then read in silence for a few moments. He closed his eyes and mumbled some words before speaking.

"All we have is yours, young lady, you need not even ask," he said, as he stood. "Come, I show you what we can offer you."

Barb jumped to her feet but the man was already walking towards a door in the far wall. "You ain't convertin' me," she called as she limped after him.

The Prime Minister sat back in her chair and read the message that had been downloaded into her neural secretary. Nasumi steepled her hands in front of her milky white face and waited patiently for Helen to open her eyes. She opened her eyes and gazed defeated across the game table at the US/Japan Foreign Minister.

"You claimed victory too early," Nasumi said, her words measured.

"Is there nothing that I could do to encourage a reconsideration?"

"Under normal circumstances, Prime Minister, I would not hesitate in negotiating reasonable terms but your ignorance of the minor players in the game has raised serious concerns about your integrity and honour." Nasumi stood and straightened out her neat grey skirt. "There were other ways to negotiate the embargo Prime Minister."

"Lewis' anti-viral agent is subject to patent laws, Minister," said Helen as she stood to take one of Nasumi's slim hands in the traditional parting handshake.

"Yes it is, Prime Minister, but the antibodies from those who have taken the cure are not. Checkmate, Prime Minister. The game is over."

"What can we do now?" Helen asked, her face ashen.

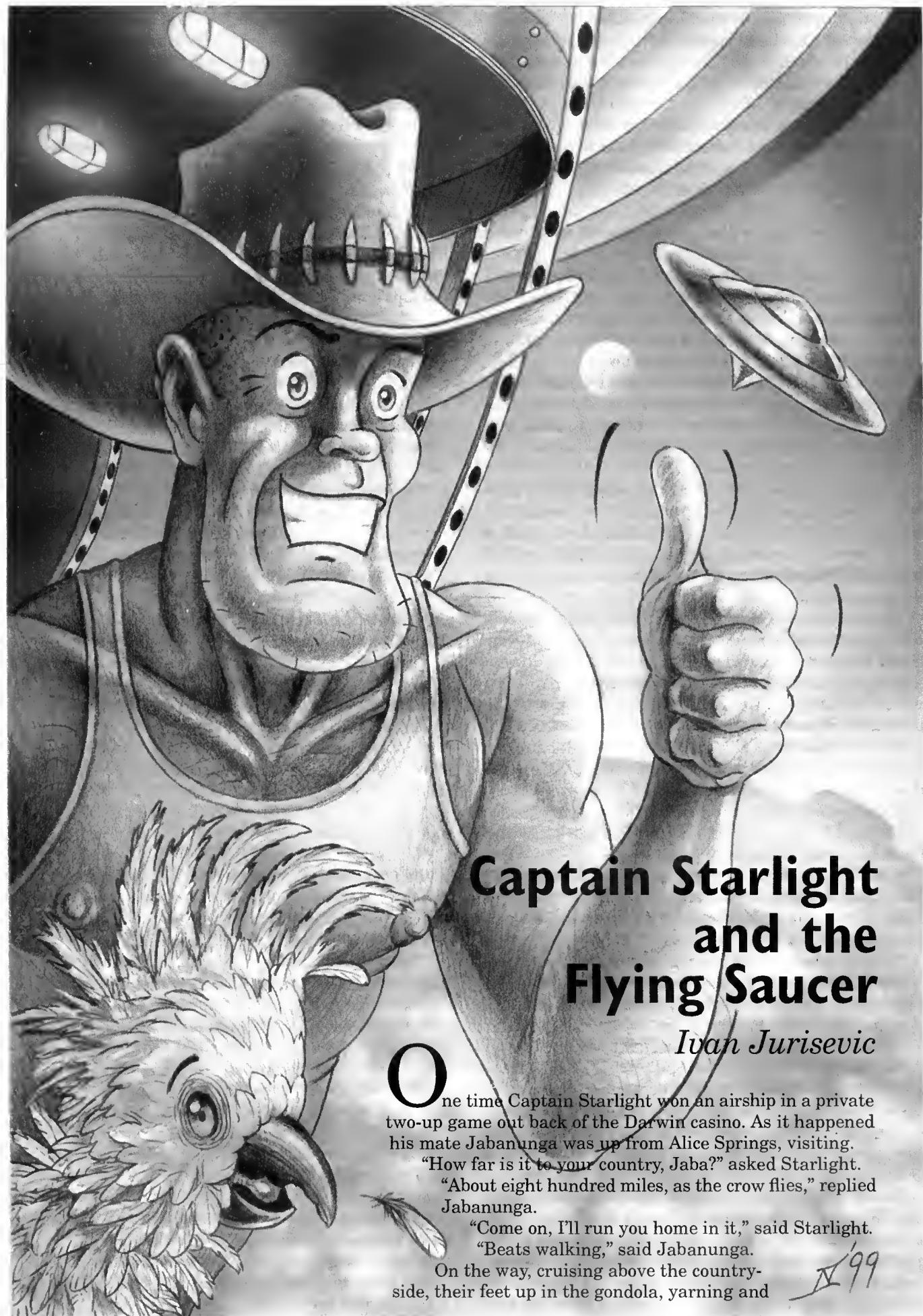
"Resign."

"But..."

"Remember the ants," Nasumi said softly. "Always remember the little ones." Nasumi left the cavernous room and the Australian Prime Minister to her thoughts.

The Prime Minister watched in silence as a small black ant crept over the toe of her cream leather shoe. She began to cry.

Robert Stephenson enjoys the company of his wife, Alice, and their two young children. He has published a book of poetry and written and produced two stage plays. He simply loves sf and writing. This is his first professional sale and he's happy with that. He lives in Hawthorndene, South Australia.



Captain Starlight and the Flying Saucer

Ivan Jurisevic

One time Captain Starlight won an airship in a private two-up game out back of the Darwin casino. As it happened his mate Jabanunga was up from Alice Springs, visiting.

"How far is it to your country, Jaba?" asked Starlight.

"About eight hundred miles, as the crow flies," replied Jabanunga.

"Come on, I'll run you home in it," said Starlight.

"Beats walking," said Jabanunga.

On the way, cruising above the countryside, their feet up in the gondola, yarning and

knocking back a few beers, they decided to name the ship the *Southern Cross*, after that constellation of five lucky stars that shines in the Southern skies and watches over Australia, and towards which our solar system is hurtling.

After a few more beers they thought they might have a go at running tourist camera safaris out to Ayers Rock.

So when they got to the Alice, they hung a sign in several languages on the bottom of the airship, cruised low and slow through the town with the stereo blaring and a rope ladder hanging down to the ground, collected a load of tourists, and set off on their first trip.

It was the middle of the Wet, and the sky was a solid mass of grey cloud, so Starlight took the airship above the weather, and they cruised in brilliant sunshine, while below them stretched a solid carpet of dazzling white cloud as far as the eye could see.

About mid-day there was a bit of a commotion up front of the gondola. All the passengers were crowding to the windows and calling to the others to come and see, so Starlight strolled over to have a look, and a spectacular sight met his eyes.

A huge precipice was coming majestically into view below them, a massive hole in the cloud, round and straight-sided, and some five miles across. As they sailed slowly over it, a breathtakingly beautiful sight revealed itself. They were looking, as through a window, directly down onto the Central desert.

There was a wind blowing down below, and soft sheets of rain were billowing across the country, rinsing the air clean. The bright sun, shining into the scene from directly above, was bathing in light what was already bathed in water, bringing out the rich, wet earth colours of the ochre soil, dusted with the greens of the desert brush.

In the middle of it, brilliant, shining, the water streaming off its back in slow giant spumes, surfacing from the desert like a great ruby whale, was Uluru, Ayers Rock.

It was framed in the perfect circle of a complete rainbow.

Starlight cut the engines, and they drifted, silent and buoyant, awed, breathless.

It was only at this moment that the Commander of a Barabaran flying saucer became aware of the Southern Cross, drifting into the centre of the rainbow between her and the Rock.

"What the hell's that?" barked the alien.

Her engineer peered at her screen. "An airship," she said.

"Idiot! Hold off on the resonators!" she bellowed to the engineer...

"I've already fired them!" she cried.

"Oh, shit," she said. "Intercept!"

The flying saucer dropped like a stone.

On the ground, pulses of energy were racing along converging lines towards the Rock, kicking up dirt as they sped across the desert floor, like fuses burning towards gelignite.

On the gondola, the tourist's cameras were clicking and whirring like a plague of locusts in a wheat field, and Jabanunga was just explaining that Uluru was a great spiritual centre, and the home of the Rainbow Serpent, with Starlight adding that at one and a half miles in length, a mile in width and towering a thousand feet

out of the surrounding desert, it was also the biggest loose pebble in the world, when the energy triggers simultaneously hit the Ayers Rock from all sides.

There was the sound of a great rising harmonic as Uluru shifted smoothly through the spectrum – redorange-yellowgreenblueindigoviolet and exploded into a long, silent concussion of white brilliance. The rainbow, acting as a lens, focused this tremendous energy onto the *Southern Cross*.

The tourists looked around in silent wonder. Everything was in brilliant colours. Everything was sparkly around the edges. Everybody looked better and younger. And the *Southern Cross*, which had been wallowing about a bit, as airships do, suddenly stood stock still and solid in mid air.

"Wow!" cried the American tourists.

"Subarachi!" cried the Japanese, politely.

"Root me boot!" said Captain Starlight.

Suddenly a huge silver flying saucer was filling one side of the gondola's windows and telescoping out a long metal rod toward them, like a proboscis.

Starlight instinctively took a step backwards in surprise and, astonishingly, so did the airship – suddenly it was two hundred yards away from the saucer. The funny thing was, nobody felt it move. One moment it was there, the next it was somewhere else.

The saucer sort of looked nonplussed for a second, if a flying saucer can do that, then it moved towards them again, proboscis extended. Starlight didn't like the look of this, and he drew back. So did the airship, moving away from the saucer.

The saucer seemed to gather itself up then, you could see it was really determined this time, and it hurled itself at them.

The Captain sidestepped, and it went careering past.

Now all this happened very fast, and up 'til this point the Captain had just been reacting instinctively, the way he might have if a drunk shearer had unexpectedly come at him in a pub. But now he took a moment to consider the matter.

"What do you reckon, Jaba?"

"I'd say this energy which came up from Uluru," said Jabanunga thoughtfully, gesturing around the gondola, "I'd say it's raw spiritual energy."

Starlight ducked the flying saucer again.

"That's what I reckon," he said. "And since spiritual laws are senior to physical laws it means that normal considerations of space-time are suspended and that mobility is limited only by imagination."

The airship was retreating backwards fast, with the flying saucer gaining rapidly.

"That's about the way I read it," said Jabanunga. "I'd say what we've got here is a Conceptual Drive."

The flying saucer was almost on them again, reaching out with its proboscis, as Starlight snapped the airship upwards suddenly, letting the saucer rush past beneath them.

"It would also follow," continued Jabanunga, "that the ship's internal inertia remains constant because you, as the captain, naturally identify with your ship."

The Captain grinned. "One way to find out," he said.

He stopped suddenly.

The flying saucer slammed right up to them, pulling itself up just in time. Starlight side-stepped to the right. The flying saucer followed. He feigned to the left, and as the saucer followed he ducked down beneath it and came up behind it. The flying saucer swivelled left and right in confusion, looking for them. The tourists applauded.

Well, there followed the most almighty chase you've ever seen in your life. Those two ships chased each other all over the sky, moving so fast they looked like they were flicking around on the end of two flashlight beams. The Captain and Jabanunga were pissing themselves laughing. Some of the passengers were just pissing themselves.

After a while Starlight got a bit jack of being chased around, being the sort of bloke he is, and he thought he'd better give the saucer a bit of a knock-back.

So he made a beeline towards Western Australia, with the flying saucer right on his tail, but high up in the stratosphere, where it could keep him in sight. Starlight went streaking through the Kimberly Range until he came to Mt. Sharing. There he whizzed round and round it, faster and faster, until he had created the biggest willy-willy there has ever been, and he ripped that mountain out of the earth like a drunken bush dentist pulling a rotten tooth and he flung it at the flying saucer high up above them.

But the saucer wasn't having any of that – it shot out a force field which smashed the mountain into smithereens, into bits of stone no bigger than your fist, which started to come raining down like the biggest meteorite shower of all time.



This was a pretty convincing display of fire-power, so Starlight thought he'd better get out of sight for a bit and reconsider his strategy.

The willy-willy had by now manoeuvred itself over the Great Sandy Desert and was sucking up such a lot of sand that half the sky was covered in red dust, so he ducked into the middle of it and sat there, safely screened from sight.

He breathed a sigh of relief.

"Here, Jaba, you take it for a while."

"Is it manual or automatic?" asked Jabanunga.

"Oh, oh," said Starlight.

Two thin vertical lines of green light had appeared on Jabanunga's face. They separated.

The dust outside parted like two curtains and there was the flying saucer, gleaming and sparkling in the sunlight not ten feet away, with its proboscis reaching out, and the air all around them thick with the hurtling remains of Mt. Sharing, which had just come crashing down from the stratosphere.

Jabanunga, startled, instinctively jerked back.

There was a huge sucking sound, and the airship seemed to fold in on itself and disappeared, taking with it the hurtling remains of Mount Sharing and the sandstorm, leaving the flying saucer spinning in a clear and empty sky.

Starlight was looking down in puzzlement at the shore of a quiet sea.

"Where are we?"

"That's the Inland Sea," said Jabanunga.

"The Inland Sea hasn't been around for a few million years," said Starlight.

"That's what it is though."

"How do you know?"

"Dreamtime wisdom," said Jabanunga mysteriously. Then he added. "And those animals down below there exist only in the fossil record."

Below them a huge sabre-tooth marsupial stalked a mob of grazing giant kangaroos. On a ridge off to the side of them a lizard thirty feet long flicked its tongue as it watched. The tourists were exclaiming in delight, their cameras whirring.

"We're in prehistoric Australia!" said Starlight. "You jumped back so fast you jumped us back through time!"

"Sorry," said Jabanunga.

"I knew I shouldn't have let you drive."

The ground began to shake. Behind them the remains of Mt. Sharing were crashing down to the ground, covering the countryside with stones.

"So that's how the Great Stony Desert was created," murmured Jabanunga. "Those endless gibber plains in the middle of Australia are the remains of Mt. Sharing."

Starlight picked up a map. "You're right," he said, pointing to a spot. "Look, Mt. Sharing has disappeared off the map."

This is true, and you can prove it for yourself. Get out a map and look for Mt. Sharing. You won't find it marked, because it's no longer there.

"Look up there," said Jabanunga. High above them the wind was blowing away the huge cloud of red dust which had been picked up by the willy-willy the Captain had raised.

"That dust is going to stay in suspension for ever," he said. "That's why we've got red sunsets around the world. Those sunsets come from the Red Heart of Australia."

Now, as everyone knows, when you go back in time as fast as that you don't have time to dissipate all that extra temporal energy, and the *Southern Cross* had arrived over pre-historic Australia blazing like a little sun. The Captain thought they'd better cool off, so he took the airship down to the Inland Sea and sat there while they discussed their situation and the sea boiled furiously around them, creating great clouds of steam which rose into the air.

Starlight, Jabanunga and the tourists reasoned like this: on the one hand they had inadvertently stumbled on a way to get away from the flying saucer because it had no way of knowing *when* they were – but on the other hand the tourists couldn't get back to their hotels. They considered going back to the future a few hours *earlier* than they had left, so missing the flying saucer altogether, but that would expose the tourists to the inconvenience of meeting themselves and then having to explain to customs how it was that two people were trying to get out of the country on the one passport. They couldn't go back *later* than they had left because that is, of course, impossible.

Now while they were having these long deliberations, they'd quite forgotten the inland sea, which was still boiling and steaming away at a furious rate, so that by the time they'd decided that their only option was to go

back to the present, it had all boiled away.

And that's the reason that there isn't an inland sea in Australia any more, because Captain Starlight and Jabanunga boiled it dry. But it was there all right, and if you want proof you can wander around in the Centre and pick up the seashells where it used to be.

As for the steam, it went half way around the world to the Middle East before it cooled down and fell as rain, and there was so much of it that it rained for forty days and forty nights, and caused the Great Flood.

Now the Captain didn't have a plan when he popped back into present time over Lake Eyre in the Mid-North of South Australia. But he'd remembered the words of the Man from Snowy River, spoken to him when they'd first gone droving together.

"Cap," he'd said, "breaking a wild brumby is like life – you just keep one picture clear in your mind – that when the action stops and the dust clears the horse is on the bottom and you're on top."

The Captain had never forgotten those words, so he knew that whatever happened he'd come out of it on top, and that was enough. For the rest he trusted himself.

Now as it happened, Lake Eyre was in one of its rare flood periods just then and the place was full of birds. There was no sign of the flying saucer, so the Captain parked above the lakeside and organized lunch, because the tourists had worked up a bit of an appetite, what with all that rushing around through space and time and everything.

While they were eating the Captain thought he'd provide a bit of entertainment, so leaned out of a window and let out a whistle, and all the Sulphur-crested Cockatoos flew off the shore of the lake and came up to the airship.

These birds remembered the Captain from the time they had become friends when the Captain had given Sir Donald Campbell a hand in setting the world land speed record of 403.1 mph on Lake Eyre back on July 1st, 1964. It's the only time that a land speed record has ever been set on a lake. It's not a well-known fact that Donald Campbell had come to the lake with a boat, thinking that a lake would have water in it, but it turned out to be dry, which it usually is. He was about to go home again when the Captain suggested: "Why don't we pull the wheels off the four-wheel drive and stick them on the boat? See how she goes." The rest is history.

Anyway, the tourists soon found that they could feed the Cockatoos by throwing their lunch out of the windows. The birds were feeding on the wing, and some were even hovering and being hand fed, which was great fun for all concerned, and pretty soon the airship was surrounded by a flock of maybe half a million birds.

The tourists were having a wonderful time, because the Cockatoo is a very intelligent bird, and like all parrots, it can talk. What's more, these birds were used to tourists and could speak a number of languages, so they were chatting away in Japanese and American and other languages too, saying things like "Parli italiano, cara?" and "Voulez-vous jiggy-jig?"

Incidentally, it was while watching this that the Captain got his idea for setting the world hang-gliding endurance record, with the help of the cockatoos. But

that's another story, because just at that moment the flying saucer reappeared.

The saucer commander had spotted the *Southern Cross* in the middle of that cloud of birds, and she did just what she had done with the cloud of dust – she just pushed in her force field and parted the Cockatoos – just shoved them aside.

Now the Cockatoo is a pretty easy-going bird, but there is one thing it can't abide, and that's bad table manners. You've probably heard cockatoos screeching at each other, and you've probably wondered what they were saying. Well, what they're doing is telling each other off for bad table manners. So the whole flock, when it had sorted out what beak and wing belonged to what bird, wheeled about as one, flew over the top of the flying saucer – which was just reaching out with its proboscis again – and shat en masse.

For an awful moment the saucer stood stock still, as if in shock, and the tourists were presented with the ghastly sight of a small mountain of fresh bird shit hanging and dripping in mid air... then the saucer took off in a frantic zig-zagging dash to the Southern Ocean some five hundred miles to the south, where it plunged in with a mighty splash and disappeared from view.

The tourists were still jumping up and down and cheering and throwing their filets mignon to the Cockatoos when it reappeared from the south, moving slowly. It looked clean, but crestfallen. It stopped a couple of hundred yards short of them. The Captain stepped a thousand miles back. The saucer followed and stopped a couple of hundred yards short again. A hole opened in the side of the saucer and the Barabaran commander stepped out and walked on thin air half-way to the airship and stopped. If you have ever seen those Aboriginal rock paintings from the central desert of beings similar to astronauts, that's what she looked like.

She made some noises and Jabanunga made some noises back.

"She wants to have a parley," he said.

"How come you can talk to them?" asked Starlight in surprise.

"Oh, this mob's been coming here for thousands of years."

"They drink beer?"

"Do birds shit?"

So Starlight went back to the fridge and fetched out a six-pack.

As it turned out they'd stopped over Ayers Rock again, and it must be admitted that the Captain felt a bit queasy stepping out onto nothing a thousand feet in the air, but he strolled over to the Barabaran, nodded and said "G'day," and sat down.

The Barabaran's eyes lit up at the sight of the beer and she sat down facing him. She accepted a beer, drained it at a swallow, and tossed the bottle over the side where it whistled all the way down. The Captain didn't comment on this example of ecological bad manners, and they proceeded to parley, with Jabanunga doing simultaneous translating.

Well, you wouldn't believe it, but it turned out that the flying saucer commander was running a tourist ship, just like the Captain, and all the chasing about was

because she wanted her energy back so that she could get her tourists back to their hotels. Would the Captain mind obliging?

The Captain replied that he would be happy to oblige, but why didn't the commander just get herself a new batch of energy?

She replied that the conditions wouldn't be right for some time, and besides, she added testily, all this chasing to and fro had already put her behind schedule. Would the Captain just keep his damned ship still for a moment so they could bloody well get on with it?

Now Captain Starlight doesn't like bad manners either.

He looked thoughtfully at his beer, took a slow sip, and looked the Barabaran over.

The Captain, he replied, rather liked his new mobility.

The Barabaran's eyes narrowed to slits, and she got heavy. She quoted the Fifth Intergalactic Law regarding the Illegal Possession of Spiritual Energy. Starlight didn't know this law, but he knew bullshit when he heard it, so he quoted the Seventh Amendment to the Fifth Law, Pertaining to the Inadvertent Interception of Spiritual Energy by Natives of a Host Planet. And as he held out the six-pack to her he added politely that the Commander might like to put her next emptie back in the carton instead of littering the landscape with it.

The commander gave him a thin smile, took a bottle, and looked him over more carefully. Would the Captain be prepared to do a deal?

Do birds shit? asked the Captain.

So they got down to some serious dickering.

Starlight figured that if they had sensors so good that they could find him in the middle of a flock of cockatoos in the middle of Australia they could probably locate a few other things as well, so he asked them to find Lasseter's Lost Reef.

Now, Lasseter was an old prospector who had got lost in the bush back in 1897 and had come wandering out of the desert out of his mind, dragging behind him the saddlebags from his dead camels, and raving about a gold reef. The saddlebags were full of gold nuggets the size of footballs. A number of expeditions were launched over the years to find the reef. Lasseter himself died on one quite near the Rock, despite the efforts of the local Aborigines who found him, and the diary of his last days makes poignant reading. But none of the expeditions came to anything, including the last one, in 1970, of which the Captain was a member.

It took a little while for the Captain to get his message across, but eventually, with the aid of a borrowed gold ring from one of the passengers and an indication of Ayers Rock below them to illustrate the scale they were talking about, the Captain felt that he'd made himself understood, because the Commander turned and called out some instructions to the saucer, which disappeared into the distance.

The Captain, Jabanunga and the Commander lay about in the sun, drinking beer and having a yarn about the tourist industry. The Captain and the Commander found that they had a lot in common, and pretty soon they became quite friendly, and did one more trade. By and by the saucer returned. A Barabaran crew-member

got out and handed some co-ordinates to the Commander, who passed them to the Captain. The three drained the last of their beers, stood up there in mid air, shook hands, and got back on board their respective ships.

The saucer edged closer and reached out with its proboscis. There was the sound of half a thunderclap and the flying saucer disappeared. The *Southern Cross* stopped sitting solid in the air and wallowed about again like a good airship should, and things were back to normal.

As soon as they got back to Alice Springs and dropped off their passengers, Starlight and Jabanunga headed for the place indicated by the co-ordinates.

They saw it from miles away, shining and flashing as they approached it in the golden light of the late afternoon sun. At first they wouldn't believe their eyes, they thought it must be some trick of the light. They stopped the ship in mid-air above it finally and gazed down in awe. The Barabarans had found the Reef all right, and they had mined it and smelted it, and formed it into a lump one and a half miles in length, a mile in width and a thousand feet high. The biggest nugget in the world. A solid gold replica of Ayers Rock.

Naturally, Captain Starlight and Jabanunga staked their claim, but very soon afterwards they were visited by a bloke who claimed he was a government representative, and he pointed out that if this deposit was ever mined the bottom would fall out of the world gold market, with disastrous results for the world's monetary system. When Jabanunga suggested that that might be the best thing that could happen to it, the guy got heavy, and suggested that if they didn't cooperate they could look forward to a visit from the CIA, the KGB and (shudder) ASIO.

Now the last thing Starlight and Jabanunga wanted to do was to start drinking with those blokes again, so the whole thing was hushed up.



So now there's a restricted zone south of Alice Springs. If you ask what's there they'll tell you it's Pine Gap, the American's Omega communications base and one-time Star Wars co-ordination centre. But that's not true – it's something far more dangerous. The truth is they're guarding the golden replica of Ayers Rock.

Incidentally, that's the reason why the Australian government sold off its gold reserves in 1997. When the new government came into power and got briefed about the gold Rock, it went into panic selling. Sure enough, it precipitated the world-wide financial crisis of 1998, which led directly to the so-called Asian meltdown. Not many people know that's how it happened.

As for Starlight and Jabanunga, they now run the *Southern Cross Line*, the biggest fleet of tourist airships in the world. Naturally enough, word got around about their first wild trip, and they soon had tourists clamouring to go out with them.

A lot of people wondered where Starlight and Jabanunga got the capital to buy all those airships. Some reckoned that they got paid off to keep quiet, but anyone who knows them would never believe that.

This is what really happened.

When they got to that monstrous lump of gold sitting in the desert south of Alice they realised straight away what was likely to happen when they announced their discovery. So they took the fireaxe and hacked out as many gold bricks as the *Southern Cross* could carry. It took them a week and a half to fill the hold with gold, and another five weeks to walk out of the bush carrying the airship and its cargo. See, they loaded the ship with just enough gold so that it weighed next to nothing, and then they carried it out on top of their heads.

It's a lot of work carrying an airship through the bush for five weeks, but they figured it was worth their weight in gold.

They hid the gold in a cleft high up the side of Ayers Rock, a small secret garden kept lush by its own little spring, and a natural refuge for all kinds of bird life. You can't see it at all from the ground, and it's very difficult to reach even if you could.

Though they say it's quite easy to get to if you can walk on air.



Ivan Jurisevic, although Slovenian by birth, moved to Australia when he was very young, "more than forty years ago." He now works as an Exhibition Strategist and travels all over the world. He lives in Sydney. This is his second "Captain Starlight" story; the first appeared in *Omega*.

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In 1991 I was checking my post office box after being away on holidays. Quite a bit of mail had built up, and the sales assistant brought a separate pile of letters from behind the counter. I opened the first letter... and with a mighty cheer I flung the letters into the air, threw my arms around the woman and hugged her until her vertebrae gave a distinct click. "Er, good news, Mr McMullen?" she asked once she got her breath back. It certainly was. My story "Pacing The Nightmare" had been accepted by *Interzone*, and I had just joined the very exclusive group of Australian authors who had sold sf in Britain.

Just what is so special about the British market to Australians? By then I had won a major award, and been published in Australia and America, yet the *Interzone* sale simply blew my reserve away. The fact is that Britain has always played a crucial role in the development of Australian sf, and to be published in Britain is to become part of quite a fascinating epic.

Emigrants: Australian sf has its origins in the 19th Century, when British authors used the continent-sized colony as a source of exotica for their novels. Terry Pratchett's *The Last Continent* (1998) demonstrates that this practice is still alive and well. When modern sf was being invented around the 1920s, publication overseas (particularly in Britain), was not just proof of ability, it was virtually the only way for Australians to get sf published. James Morgan Walsh, famous for *Vandals of The Void* (1931), migrated to Britain in the late 20s and subsequently built a literary career that those remaining in Australia could only dream about – including five sf novels and seven short stories. In 1910 Coutts Armour migrated to Britain and sold over a hundred sf stories to the *Red, Yellow and Green Magazines* during the next

sixteen years as Coutts Brisbane.

There were Australian authors publishing sf locally in this period, but their output was minuscule in comparison. There was enough of a local publishing industry in Australia to support an occasional sf novel or story, but nothing that could be termed a market existed. Local publishers did not understand sf and that which found its way into print did so largely by accident, so Australian sf did little more than survive. Sea mail was the only mail, and savvy for overseas markets was hard to acquire. One had to move overseas to have sf published.

Immigrants: In 1940 wartime import restrictions suddenly choked off the supply of overseas sf. Local publishers realized that there was still a demand to be met, and what followed was an orgy of awfulness as the few relatively experienced sf authors emptied their bottom drawers, and crime authors began setting their plots off-world. The end of the war did not see the end of wartime restrictions (!) and a very peculiar hybrid of sf, crime and general adventure known as "scientific thrillers" came to dominate Australian sf. Standards were... absent. British migrant Alan Yates (later the author

The British Benchmark

Sean McMullen

of the Carter Brown crime series) commenced his career writing scientific thrillers in the early '50s, and in one story managed to position Alpha Centauri somewhere between Mars and Jupiter.

It was about now that sf began to permeate Australian culture more deeply, thanks to Hollywood and the early space exploration programme. Mainstream magazines such as *The Australian Journal* and *Man* featured occasional sf stories, and one British ship's captain, A. Bertram Chandler, was even selling to *Man* ten years before he migrated to Australia. Other British migrants were also bringing their ideas and skills south. Neville Shute was also an established author when he arrived, but he wrote one of the classics of sf, *On The Beach* (1957), in Australia. Norma Hemming arrived from Britain in 1949, and by the time of her death in 1960 had shown Australia and the world that women can write hard sf as well as anyone, and had written and produced Australia's first known sf for the stage.

Invaders: Australian readers' patience with the "scientific thrillers" had frayed badly by 1952. Some British magazines were slipping through loopholes in the law by publishing "Australian" editions, and thus blowing the local, protected market wide open. In 1958 the "wartime" restrictions were finally repealed and British and American republications had introduced modern sf into the Australian environment, but Australian authors were without any local, specialized sf market. Naturally, they turned to Britain.

British editor John Carnell was the patron, lifeline and guardian angel of Australian short sf overseas from the late '50s until his death in 1972. For a couple of years in the early '60s there were more Australian works than American in the pages of *New Worlds*, and Australian based authors such as Harding, Rome, Hemming, Chandler, Wellwood, Broderick, Whiteford and

Sean McMullen (centre) with his daughter Catherine (left) and his wife Trish Smyth.



Baxter were showing the world what they could do via British magazines. Harding actually topped two readers polls, Hemming scored second in another, and A. Bertram Chandler was selling one story per fortnight from Australia during 1958.

The cultural exchange was not confined to print media. The Australian television series, THE STRANGER, was resold to the BBC and enjoyed good ratings in Britain. Centred around a crashed UFO in the Blue Mountains near Sydney, it was something of an X-FILES precursor in mood. Of course Doctor Who, Out Of The Unknown, the Quatermass series and the brilliant (and now lost!) A for Andromeda were streaming out of Britain to help revolutionize sf in Australia.

In a real sense the early '60s were wonderful for Australians. The long darkness of isolation was lifting, they were being taken seriously overseas, and local mainstream magazines were making up for the lack of a specialist sf market. Australians could finally be part of a world scene while writing from Australia. Then suddenly everything fell apart as the New Wave crashed down on Australian shores and the sf sandcastles thereon. Single-idea stories involving technowhizz themes became very much harder to sell and worse, Michael Moorcock was in charge of New Worlds and not particularly sympathetic to the variety of sf that Australians were writing.

Vision of Tomorrow: One of the most ambitious experiments in the history of Australian and British sf was the magazine *Vision of Tomorrow*. It was Australian-funded but based and edited in Britain, and a dozen well produced, beautifully illustrated issues were published in 1969-70. The intention was to apportion a certain amount of space to Australian authors, to be published alongside British contributors, but there was a glaring problem. While British authors were used to turning out short fiction rapidly for several of monthly magazines, very few Australians were experienced at being so prolific. Compounding this were distribution problems and eventually the backer, Sydney businessman and sf fan Ron Graham, withdrew his support.

Arguments over just who or what was responsible for *Vision's* demise could fill another article, but as a venue for promoting Australian sf overseas it was probably doomed from the start. Besides, those Australians who were selling in Britain and America were doing so on their own merits. Chandler sold nine short stories and three books overseas while *Vision* was being published,

and only one of those stories was to *Vision*. To add insult to injury, the only Australian to win a *Vision* readers' poll was another British immigrant, Jack Wodhams.

Publishers: By the mid-'70s *Science Fiction Monthly* and *New Writings in SF* were publishing occasional Australian stories in Britain, but back in Australia the British born editor, publisher, bookseller and author Paul Collins was about to introduce Australian sf to small press commercial fiction. Just before the 1975 World sf Convention in Melbourne the 20 year-old decided to publish his own professional sf magazine and use the profits to support himself while he wrote. While this might have made him a front runner for the Jemima Puddle-duck Naïvety Award, it did nothing to support his writing career. *Void* magazine broke even and did a lot of good, however. It ran for six issues, then became the *Worlds* anthology series which pioneered swords & sorcery in Australia and culminated in *Fantastic Worlds* (1998). More importantly, *Void* was the first of many small press productions in Australian sf and its offshoot, *Void Publications*, still holds the Australian record for the number of small press genre books published.

More Emigrants: Within Australia the debate continued about whether an author can be more successful by living in Britain or America, because in spite of improvements in communications and local Australian publishing, there were several emigrants to Britain who had done particularly well. David Rome was born in Britain, spent his childhood in Australia and then moved back to Britain when he began writing. Although the majority of his stories were not as erudite as those of his contemporaries Lee Harding, John Baxter and Damien Broderick, his tally of published works for the 1960s nevertheless exceeded theirs. Living in Britain did seem to help.

Australian-born John Brosnan went to Britain in 1970, and all of his significant publications were subsequent to this move. He has had over a dozen sf novels published, and his collaboration with Leroy Kettle, *Carnosaur* (1984), beat Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park* (1990) to reconstructing dinosaurs from fossil DNA. Soon after Brosnan arrived in Britain, however, he began writing about sf in the cinema, and during the 1970s wrote several well regarded books on the subject. Peter Nicholls also went to Britain in 1970, and also quickly became established as an important authority on sf. His work culminated in the Hugo winning *Encyclopedia of*

Science Fiction (1979), for which he was the general editor. The 1993 edition also won a Hugo.

What Brosnan and Nicholls found was that Britain was geographically small and very central as far as international sf is concerned. Access to British, American and Continental authors was comparatively easy. Information for their reference books that would have taken years to gather from Australia took weeks in Britain.

Interzone: In 1982 *Interzone* first appeared. Destined to become the flagship of British sf magazines, it quickly acquired Australian migrant Judith Hanna on its editorial staff, but it was the fiction of Greg Egan that has proved to be *Interzone's* greatest Australian find. Egan had published three sf stories in Australian anthologies by the time "The Mind Vampires" (IZ 18, 1987) appeared. While this ranked an unpromising 18/22 in the readers' poll, Egan continued to refine his fiction until "Learning to Be Me" (IZ 36, June 1990) topped the *Interzone* readers' poll and became the first Australian work to reach the final ballot of the British SF Awards – a feat so far not matched by any other Australian author. Only a few other Australians, such as Sean McMullen, Terry Dowling and Stephen Dedman are on *Interzone's* list of antipodean contributors, but talk to nearly any author in Australian sf circles and you will find that they have submitted something to *Interzone* at some stage. Why? Admittedly authors will try any market at least once, but benchmarks are important to them as well. *Interzone* publishes the best of what it receives worldwide, while Australian magazines specialize – mostly – in Australian authors. Besides, British editors are perceived as being more sympathetic to the weird, unusual and experimental than their American counterparts, and Australian sf certainly has a strong element of the peculiar.

Into the Unknown: As we approach both Australia's third World Science Fiction Convention and the end of the century, Australian genre publishing is big enough to be self-supporting, yet sf is still being sent to Britain. Perhaps it always will be, for the motive now is "What do you think of this?" rather than "Please help us!" While the Australian contribution to British sf and fantasy must seem slight from the British perspective, in Australian terms it has generated invaluable confidence and encouraged local authors in times when benchmarks and encouragement were lacking locally.

Sean McMullen

It was Clarke Award time again in May, and the usual slightly glittering crowd assembled in the Science Museum, London, for the presentation of Sir Arthur's £1,000 cheque and single bookend. First, a special British SF Association award went to David Pringle for general staunchness in publishing *Interzone*. (The 1999 BSFA trophies are black cuboids designed to go on bedside tables, so winners can reach out at dead of night and be comforted by the large friendly letters BSFA bulging from the sides in Braille.) After a suitable build-up of dramatic tension by administrator Paul Kincaid, it was announced that the Clarke winner was *Dreaming in Smoke* by Tricia Sullivan, who was there to accept and to disparage her own book as unworthy: the most common vox-pop reaction afterwards was, "Oops, I haven't read that one." Once again there were rumours of mayhem in the judges' final three-hour debate that picked this winner from the shortlist of six; one gleaned it wasn't an entirely unanimous decision, and that this was a compromise choice which might very well not have been any judge's first selection.

THE GREY GENTLEMEN

Ronald Chetwynd-Hayes of horror/supernatural fame celebrated his 80th birthday on Sunday 30 May.

Stephen Gallagher has a modest proposal: "John Clute's sharp description of the aim of the Richard Evans Award makes me wonder whether, in the interests of cosmic balance, we shouldn't offer some form of recognition to those authors whose commercial success has far exceeded the intrinsic value of their work. It could take the form of a gilded turd. The 'Gildo'."

Peter Nicholls (writes his alter-ego the Man With No Name from Mel-bourne) "was, irritatingly, diagnosed on his 60th birthday in March with prostate cancer. It is, as yet, not troubling him, apart from an urgent need to pee at 4am. Treatment comes in two parts: the first is X-Ray therapy to burn out the offending bits of the organ in revolt, and the second is the insertion of a radioactive pebble not far from where he sits down. Like all sf encyclopedia editors, he has always wanted a radioactive pebble of his own, and probably deserves one. There is an 80% chance that all will be well after these actions have been taken, though it may be that people will no longer have to lock up their wives while he's in their vicinity. To all those who, observing his cigar smoking, prophesied lung cancer, sucks boo. You were wrong."

Christopher Priest's authorship of the *eXistenZ* novelization (see previous column) is an even worse-kept secret in the USA: John Douglas of HarperCollins gleefully reports that the John Luther Novak pseudonym "appears nowhere on the US edition and the author's true name is on the cover for all to see."

INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

A recent small convention, Seccon in Stevenage, revived the long-hoped-lost *Fundament!* – the Oxford University SF Group's unauthorized musical spoof of the entire Foundation trilogy. This is somewhat telescoped, as indicated by the Mule's exit line: "Curses! I forgot that my mutation renders me so weak that the effort of singing could at any time kill me stone dead... Aaargghhhh." Asimov purists were especially intrigued by the final evocation of Hari Seldon lurching up from his Time Vault wheelchair at the close of *Second Foundation*, with the words, "Mein Fuhrer... I can walk!"

FTL is a new British magazine of "SF, Space and Science," ed. Wendy Graham of *Space Voyager* fame. Also involved: Patrick Moore, Ian Stewart, Jack Cohen, Rog Peyton, Dave Holmes. At present it exists only as a website, the intended print edition having been put on hold: see <http://ftlmagazine.com>.

Mythopoeic Awards fiction shortlist ... Adult Literature: Charles de Lint, *Someplace to be Flying*; Neil Gaiman and Charles Vess, *Stardust*; R. E. Klein, *The History of Our World Beyond the Wave*; Patricia A. McKillip, *Song for the Basilisk*; James Stoddard, *The High House*. Children's: Kara Dalkey, *Heavenward Path*; Diana Wynne Jones, *The Dark Lord of Derkholm*; Gail Carson Levine, *Ella Enchanted*; Gerald Morris, *The Squire's Tale*; J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. J. R. R. Tolkien's exceedingly posthumous *Roverandom* didn't make it on to this Inkings-oriented award's fiction shortlists, but was included under "Scholarship" for the editors' rather than the author's efforts.

Drolleries. A *Washington Post* competition requested titles and blurbs for merged books, attracting sf entries like the winning "*Fahrenheit 451 of the Vanities* – An '80s yuppie is denied books. He does not object, or even notice." Also: "*2001: A Space Iliad* – The Hal 9000 computer wages an insane 10-year war against the Greeks after falling victim to the Y2K bug." ... "*Rikki-Kon-Tiki-Tavi* – Thor Heyerdahl recounts his attempt to prove Rudyard Kipling's theory that

ANSIBLE LINK



DAVID LANGFORD

the mongoose first came to India on a raft from Polynesia."

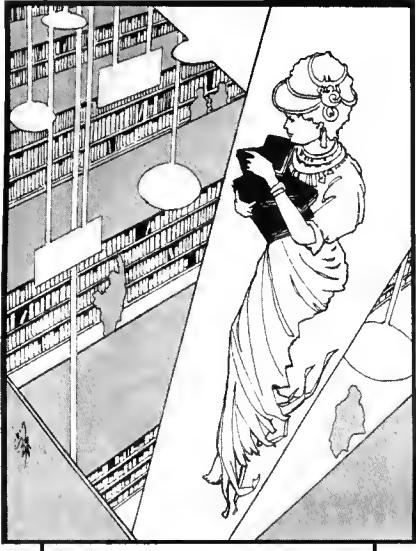
The Dead Past. "Songmaster is my last novel to be marketed as science fiction." (Orson Scott Card, letter to *SF Review*, 1980)

Shameless Self-Promotion. Recent Langford writing includes text and captions for *A Cosmic Cornucopia*, a forthcoming Paper Tiger collection of Josh Kirby's paintings. Kirby isn't usually considered a controversial artist, but life is different in rustic Shelfanger, Norfolk: "I was almost drummed out of the village after an Anglia tv Folio programme on me. Villagers unaccustomed to scantily clad maidens slaying giants gave me an uneasy time for a while where urban sophisticates wouldn't have batted an eyelid... Role-playing game books even attracted flak from the local vicar!" Oh dear.

Thog's Masterclass. "Terror quacked like a choking duck in Dirk's chest, and he couldn't get his voice to work." (A. A. Attanasio, *Arc of the Dream*, 1986)

... "Before, however, the moon had glided more than a soundless pace or two on her night journey, Myfanwy and her incomparable ass were safely out of sight..." (Walter de la Mare, "The Lovely Myfanwy", 1925)... "Stripped of their ceremonial robes and wearing only leather shorts, the men's arm muscles bulged and flattened..." (Jane Yolen, *A Sending of Dragons*, 1987)... "Laser cannon erupted like acid-stomached giants, belching forth corrosive froth that even the alloy hulls could not withstand for any appreciable length of time." (Dean R. Koontz, *Star Quest*, 1968)

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Punching Above Its Weight

Tom Arden

Australia, mid-century. There was something strangely eternal about it – as if the great timelessness of the interior deserts had crept outwards, capturing the low, flat coastal towns with their quarter-acre blocks and brick-veneer bungalows, their backyard barbecues and station wagons and clean, suburban beaches. It was all very safe, orderly, and affluent – and it seemed it would never change. Why should it? Australia, we were told, was the envy of the world.

It was also a place of suffocating provincialism, conservatism and intolerance. This was the place that made Germaine Greer into a feminist and Peter Tatchell into a gay rights campaigner. As for racism... well, between South Africa and Australia, there was only ever a question of numbers. The aborigines – those who survived the numerous attempted genocides of the 19th century – were not even accorded the status of citizens in their own country. They weren't counted in the census and they weren't allowed to vote. The White Australia Policy – an immigration law designed to fend off the "Yellow Peril" – was cheerily defended even in the schoolyard, where children would parrot the famous joke – of some crappy old politician – that "Two Wongs don't make a white."

In this odd, enclosed world – at once sinister, yet strangely innocent – discovering sf was, for some of us, a revelation. Here were images of a world – of worlds – beyond Australia's blandly bourgeois suburbs. Adventures. Ideas. And sometimes, though not often, tantalizing glimpses of Australia

itself, transformed by time into something very different. In Clarke's *Prelude to Space*, Australia is the centre of a futuristic space programme. In Heinlein's *Tunnel in the Sky*, an artificial sea floods the interior. A vast population lives along the shores, but consists entirely of the despised "Yellow Peril." The white Australians have fled – to New Zealand, if I remember correctly.

But these were just glimpses. There were no Australian sf writers – or rather, in the 1960s and '70s, I was not aware of any. It's a pity George Turner didn't get going earlier. Turner, who died in 1997, is widely

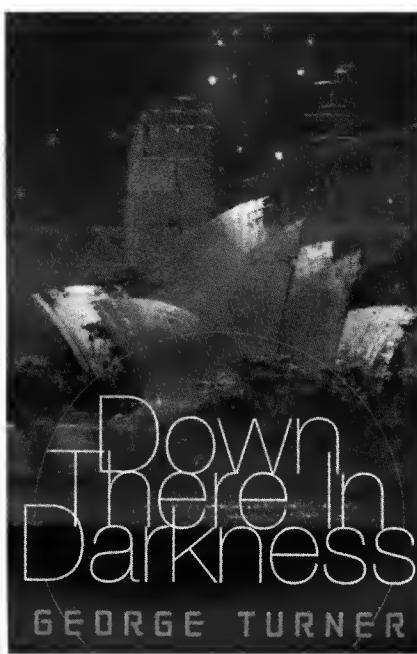
considered to be Australia's greatest sf writer, but his career had an unusual shape. Beginning as a mainstream novelist in the 1950s, he published no sf until 1978, after which he rapidly established himself as an sf futurologist in the classic tradition, tackling themes such as genetic engineering, global catastrophe, and the ethical dilemmas of scientific research. Much of the interest of his work lies in its specifically Australian context. His last novel, *Down There in Darkness* (Tor, \$23.95), provides an effective summation of his themes.

In 2070, in the once-placid, temperate city of Melbourne – now squalid, overpopulated, and sweltering under the greenhouse effect – detective Harry Ostrov investigates the mystery surrounding an avant-garde artist who has been in a coma for decades, following a psychological experiment that went disastrously wrong. The experiment involved "morphic resonance," a sort of induced meditation whereby the subject makes contact with a universal mind in which all thoughts and memories of the human race are present simultaneously. But if we seem at first to be in for a noirish tale of weird cults and suspect research, the novel soon broadens remarkably in scope.

Placed in suspended animation, Ostrov and his sidekick wake into a very different world, in which sinister biologist Professor Wishart has drastically reduced the population through a genetically engineered virus, and his bitchy granddaughter presides over a fanatical scheme of eugenic breeding. But this joyless utopia is rapidly collapsing; bio-engineering alone is not enough, and only the mystery of "morphic resonance" – which turns out to be linked, intriguingly, to the aboriginal "Dream Time" – can save the human race.

One can fault this novel in a number of ways. In part, it is an updated version of the "catastrophe" genre, but lacks the sharpness of focus, the classical elegance with which, say, John Christopher would deal with such material. The narrative method is disjointed, with clumsy changes in point of view. Characterization is limited. Turner is most comfortable with a sort of four-square, woodenly normal male character; he can't do women at all, and the book's single sex scene – "John Thomas" stuff, straight out of *Lady Chatterley* – is risible.

But much the same could be said of many sf writers, particularly those of the "golden age" (it is striking to realize that Turner, who once won the Clarke Award, was actually older than Clarke). What is impressive is the dark grandeur and imaginative sweep of the story, and the fascination





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of the ideas. Like Clarke – or Wells – Turner at his best rises to a strange, evocative poetry, as in his visions of the Melbourne suburbs, overgrown and desolate, with the towers of the old city gleaming in the distance.

Down There in Darkness is a satire on yet another failed, futuristic utopia. But the final image of the novel, of humanity transformed by the “world mind” and reaching out to the stars, is utopian in the best sense – and gives us the thrill of classic sf.

I once heard a TV presenter in Australia, introducing an item on India, remark that it was strange that there were not more links between the two countries – after all, they had a “shared colonial past.” Well, yes... but think about it for five seconds...

In white-dominated ex-colonies such as Australia, New Zealand and Canada, cultural commentators like nothing more than to see themselves as an oppressed people, grappling bravely towards self-determination – conveniently forgetting that they themselves are the colonizers, not the colonized. National identity is discussed endlessly, every bit as much as in Scotland or Wales, and an academic pseudo-subject, “Postcolonial Studies,” has been invented to fuel this obsession. But it’s debatable whether you can have a national identity by willing it into existence, or whether 200 years is long enough to forge a unique culture.

These reflections are inspired by *Centaurus: The Best of Australian Science Fiction* (Tor, \$29.95), edited by David G. Hartwell and Damien Broderick, and published to coincide with the 1999 World Science Fiction Convention in Melbourne. Broderick, who introduces the book, is keen to claim the uniqueness of Australians and, *ergo*, Australian sf. “Australia is... different,” he begins, but the difference remains an assertion, neither demonstrated nor defined. What Broderick does do, at some length – with numerous quotations from his own previous writings – is bemoan the lot of the Australian writer, trapped by the “colonial experience” in a legacy of “dispossession.”

Doris Lessing’s memories of intellectual and cultural life in 1930s Rhodesia – there wasn’t any – could hardly be more bleak than Broderick’s account of his early career in Australia; one can only wonder at the stoicism that kept him there when near-contemporaries such as Clive James and Germaine Greer couldn’t get out fast enough. Australians, Broderick remarks at one point, live in a “hand-me-down culture” – as if culture weren’t “hand-me-down” by definition. The notion that Europeans – the inhabitants of, say, Birmingham – live a rich traditional life, in

tune with their environment and their centuries-old ways, is a peculiar colonial delusion. We have all been “dispossessed” by capitalism and science, and there’s no going home.

Fortunately the stories in this anthology – including one by Broderick – are much better than the introduction. From space opera to alternate history, from time travel to cyberpunk, this is a wide-ranging, generous collection, leaving one not with a sense of an homogeneous culture but rather of an impressive creative diversity. Some stories feature Australian settings and characters, but many do not; the Australian vernacular makes its appearance here and there, though mercifully only one story is written in it throughout (all misspellings and dropped g’s and h’s). Greg Egan is here with “Wang’s Carpets,” familiar from Greg Bear’s *New Legends* anthology; George Turner’s “Flowering Mandrake” is a scrupulously-written first-contact story; in “The Total Devotion Machine,” Rosaleen Love offers a spiky feminist fable – somewhat in the manner of Fay Weldon – while Chris Lawson’s “Written in Blood” mingles Islam, higher mathematics and genetic engineering.

There’s much more. Of the 20 stories, my own favourite is Peter Carey’s “The Chance.” Whether Carey – who won the Booker Prize in 1988 – is really an sf author, fantasist or magical realist is a moot point. What is certain is that this grotesque, perverse tale of a genetic lottery, which enables people to refashion their physical selves – and of the beautiful, wealthy socialists who choose to be ugly, in order to identify with the lower orders – is funny, moving and brilliantly written.

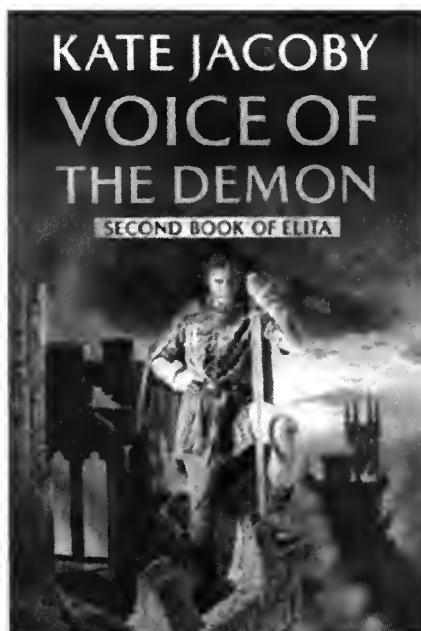
In population terms, Australia is a small country; in literary terms, it consistently punches above its weight. This anthology is proof enough of that.

Broderick’s anxieties about being Australian don’t mean much – or so I would guess – to Sara Douglass or Kate Jacoby. Both are epic fantasists, and both – like many of their counterparts overseas – write about imaginary mediæval worlds. Their novels thus have a decidedly international quality – though Australian readers will appreciate some of Douglass’ in-jokes, such as calling a bend in a river “Tailem Bend” (the real name of a town in South Australia).

In *StarMan* (Voyager, £5.99), Douglass concludes “The Axis Trilogy” – previous volumes are *BattleAxe* and *Enchanter* – which has already made her a considerable reputation in Australia. Admittedly, some reviewers seem most impressed by the mere fact that an Australian is writing stuff like this – it never used to be this way. This is BCF (Big Commercial Fantasy) with a vengeance – the universe in peril, mystery and prophecy, lots of silly names and heroic derring-do. If you like Eddings and Jordan, this is worth a try – but start at the beginning, because Book Three on its own is nigh-on incomprehensible.

Douglass is a writer who first appeared in Australia – when Harper-Collins Australia launched a fantasy list, she was their big discovery. Kate Jacoby made her debut with a British publisher. *Voice of the Demon* (Gollancz, £16.99), the second in “The Books of Elita,” follows last year’s *Exile’s Return*. There is something appealing in the idea of this series, a tale of political intrigue and sorcery set in a land based on mediæval Scotland. One imagines – or at least I did – a rich, high-camp farrago of Dorothy Dunnett, *Kidnapped*, *Lucia di Lammermoor* and the Scottish play. The novel itself doesn’t quite deliver. Jacoby has an easy, natural way with narrative and her scenes move swiftly enough, but neither the characters nor the setting are as vivid as one might wish. Like Douglass, Jacoby writes a kind of fantasy soap opera, with all the limitations this implies – but, no doubt, all the potential popularity, too. The chap on the cover looks like he’s about to strip.

There is an argument that Australian fantasists should dump the cod-European stuff, drawing instead on their own country’s imagery, history and mythology. It’s not an argument I’d make – it’s no good being prescriptive for the imagination, especially someone else’s; the ancestral heritage of Europe, too, is as much





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the property of Australians as of anyone else. Yet it seems odd that it is a British fantasy writer – Alan Garner in *Strandloper* – who has responded most fulsomely to Australian landscape and mythology. One might also note the mystical and fan-

What, to borrow an old advertising strapline, makes Canadian sf so new, so different? It's not a trivial question. Twenty-five years ago, Canada could muster no more than a handful of sf and fantasy writers; now it has the largest number outside of the United States. According to its latest directory, there are 49 members of the SFWA living in Canada, more than in any other country except the US itself – more even than in the UK which, despite the recent renaissance in sf publishing, has only a paltry 19 (and one of those is John Clute, an ex-pat Canadian). Given that contemporary sf is shaped by American culture and attitudes, this is not unimportant. Does Canada provide a useful alternative to the reflexive gung-ho, technophilic semi-imperialism of much of mainline commercial sf and almost all of TV and cinematic sci-fi? And if so, does it have any unifying characteristics?

Questions which *Northern Suns* (Tor, \$24.95), the second anthology of Canadian fantastic fiction edited by David Hartwell and Glenn Grant, raises but does not really answer (this reviewer notes in passing that he has not seen their first anthology, *Northern Stars*, but suspects that it didn't provide any clear answers either). According to Glenn Grant's introduction, there really aren't any generalities to be made, except that, unlike American and British sf, the Canadian variety does not have a pulp tradition and so there is no real divide between genre and "literary" fiction, and that it includes a francophone influence, "tending towards surrealism, allegory, and folk tale, rather than the extrapolative science fiction mode." (Contrary to Grant's thesis, though, British sf doesn't have a pulp tradition either, since it began with H. G. Wells and other writers of scientific romances rather than with Hugo Gernsback's *Amazing Stories*, but perhaps Grant's lumping together of American and British sf is an unconscious device to distance Canadian sf from that of its former imperial ruler.) John Clute, in an afterword which moves from the general to the particular case of perhaps the most famous Canadian sf author, A. E. van Vogt, is more prescriptive, suggesting that Canadian sf novels, whether by natives or Americans who have made Canada their home, such as Robert Charles Wilson or William Gibson, are fables of survival, their heroes soli-

tactical elements in the work of Australian "mainstream" writers such as Patrick White and Randolph Stow (Stow's *Tourmaline* – surely the great Australian film that has yet to be made – is more than halfway to being fantasy, or apocalyptic sf). What direc-

tions might the work of such writers suggest for Australian fantasy?

Tom Arden

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of the stories evoke a strong sense of place. Only one, Eric Choi's "Divisions," is about the anglophone and francophone cultural divide, while Jean Pierre April's "Rêve Canadien" imagines a strange alternate Canada displacing reality; by the end of the story, the real Canada has vanished.

Indeed, the most common themes are nostalgia and anxiety about change – as if the literary influence to which Glenn Grant alludes has overwritten the science-fictional notion of the future as another country whose strangeness is to be eagerly explored. Wesley Herbert's hard-boiled story of a Calderesque assassin, "Twilight of the Real," is the only one in which the future is celebrated as a place where they do things differently; even the hardest of the few full-blown hard sf stories, Karl Schroeder's "Halo," foregrounds the mundane small-change of ordinary family life on an interstellar colony, while a threat to its survival erupts and is defeated off-stage.

Pace Clute, not a few of the stories are about survival, often in the margins of society, as in Ursula Pflug's "Bugtown" and Robert Boyczuk's "Doing Time," and there's a sense in many of the stories, most overtly stated in Derryl Murphy's "The History of Photography," that the future is a cold wind from which things of value must be sheltered. In some, such as Jan Lars Jensen's "Domestic Slash & Thrust," which parodies the modern obsession with design over function, technology is definitely not a Good Thing. Cory Doctorow's "Craphound," the stand-out story in the anthology, is a sweet first-contact tale about an odd friendship between an alien and a man who makes his living combing yard sales for valuable cultural ephemera, in which the past is definitely more precious than the hi-tech kit of sci-fi futures. Doctorow is particularly successful in describing the peculiar nostalgia evoked by junk culture artefacts, which the aliens value more highly than their technological miracles. The aliens depart with their prized junk; the narrator finds work "as chief picker and factum factotum" in a chi-chi boutique owned by a former patent lawyer who once specialized in exploiting the aliens' technological gifts.

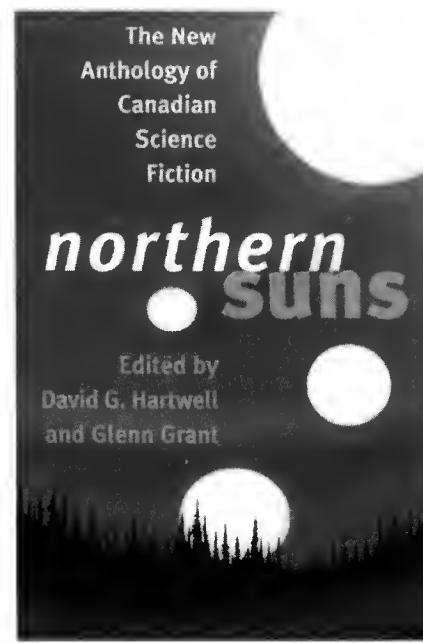
A few of the stories – notably a couple of laboured alternate histories and a rather silly vampire story – miss their marks, but overall this is a use-

Our Friends From the North

Paul J. McAuley

tary rather than messianic figures.

Certainly, the wide range of the stories collected in *Northern Suns*, from parodic fabulation through ghost stories and full-blown horror to biopunk, precludes any easy categorization. There are stories from Canadian sf magazines and Canadian literary magazines. There are stories from writers generally considered "literary": Margaret Atwood's "Freeforall" is a somewhat laboured glimpse into a near future where division of the sexes has become rigidly codified; W. P. Kinsella's "Things Invisible to See" is a frothy, funny confection about loan words; Robertson Davies's "Offer of Immortality" is a gothic story in a comically realized university setting, with a nicely nasty twist. Oddly, although most are set in Canada, few





ful collection of stories which are mostly happier dealing with the human heart than with hardware. Since they were mostly published in Canadian fiction magazines such as *On Spec*, and the *Tesseracts* series of anthologies, all difficult to obtain in the UK, it's unlikely that you, gentle reader, will have encountered any of them (except for Geoff Ryman's "Fan," first published in *Interzone* #81), although I believe that most would comfortably fit into *Interzone*'s pages. That's a recommendation, of course.

Canadian writer Peter Watts's first novel, *Starfish* (Tor, \$23.95) is a gritty, deep-sea tale set sometime in the next century, with refugees from the effects of global warming packing the shorelines of the continents and multinational corporations planning to exploit the geothermal resources of hydrothermal vents deep beneath the oceans. Lenie Clarke (a homage to the author of *The Deep Range*? – there's also a Ballard) is one of the workers at Beebe Station, all of whom have been surgically altered to be able to breathe water and withstand the crushing pressure of the benthic depths. And all, including Clarke, a survivor of abuse, are near or actual psychopaths horribly damaged in various ways by experiences which have turned them into stress junkies, the kind of person which company psychologists believe, rather implausibly, to be able best survive the terrible risks of their work.

Gradually, two plot strands converge. One turns on the mystery of why gigantism is so prevalent in the fish species inhabiting the vents around Beebe (in a restrained yet chilling subplot, it also affects one of the workers). The other is a conspiracy by the multinationals to set off underwater quakes to get rid of the refugees; Lenie Clarke, partly healed by briefly taking a lover, must find a way of uniting her disparate and violent crew of workers against it.

Starfish suffers from a clumsy episodic structure which doesn't quite knit together, as if Watts isn't really convinced by the standard big-business conspiracy which drives his narrative; indeed, its resolution is more or less thrown away in favour of a more personally redemptive but inconclusive ending. There's also, despite the obvious care with which he fleshes them out, a dearth of likeable characters, a relentless melodramatic pitch, and far too much synthetic angst – its characters find it hard to get through a door without suffering a nervous breakdown. But Watts's evocation of the nightmarish claustrophobia of Beebe Station is good, and he writes well and with authority about the weird beauty of

the vents and their strange inhabitants. He's clearly in for the long haul; one hopes that he will be more comfortable inhabiting his next novel.

By contrast, French-Canadian writer Joel Champetier's *The Dragon's Eye* (Tor, \$23.95) is a sophisticatedly laid-back piece of narrative misdirection which only gradually reveals the ulterior motive in its seemingly routine treatment of that sf cliché, the interplanetary spy. Like much French sf, particularly that of comic-books, it is a colourful story in which well-worn sf tropes such as hovercraft and lasers (and presumably – they aren't seen – the vast fl interstellar craft which make it economically viable to transport cars and trains from Earth to an interstellar colony) decorate rather than advance the plot. The setting, a world colonized by the Chinese, is not very different from Earth; in an explicit parallel to Hong Kong, offworlders are restricted to an enclave around the spaceport on an island off the shore of the world's main continent. Apart from the blinding presence of, and consequent precautions against, one of its two suns, a blue-white dwarf, the eponymous Eye of the Dragon, the world's exoticism is touched upon only sparingly; the alien intricacies of Chinese culture are far more thoroughly and deftly explored.

The plot is simple. The colony world is in debt to Earth, and a network of spies is keeping track of the separatist movement which threatens Earth's investment. One of the spies is a turncoat native deeply involved with the government. After the turncoat vanishes into the interior, Réjean Tanner is sent from Earth to track him down. Disguised as a new Chi-

nese colonist, Tanner crosses to the forbidden mainland, where immediately things begin to go wrong. His partner is arrested and must be freed, and in the process Tanner becomes entangled with a girl in trouble with petty crooks. Although his mission is successful, it is at a terrible human cost, and meanwhile shifts in the political climate have considerably reduced its worth.

The Chinese setting is richly and convincingly detailed, and Tanner is a competent yet reticent and vulnerable hero with rather more moral scruples than usual, alert to the rich ironies of his situation. Although deeply imbued with sf virtues, the ending of this well-wrought albeit somewhat old-fashioned novel, nimbly translated by Jean-Louis Trudel, strikes a sombre note that is far from the triumphalist brass that still sounds loudly throughout much of the genre.

Sean McMullen, although an Australian, writes of the kind of heroes redolent of sf's Golden Age, those whose mastery of the world is achieved by technical prowess and ruthless cunning. The Roman legionary hero of *The Centurion's Empire* proved more than a match for the future; in *Souls in the Great Machine* (Tor, \$27.95), there are no less than four fiercely canny protagonists out to carve up the world, all but one of them female.

But before we plunge into the intricate plot of this ambitious novel, a word about its history, which is nowhere evident in the proof copy. Those, like me, who have been waiting for the conclusion of McMullen's *Greatwinter* trilogy with publication of the long-promised *Miocene Arrow*, will be somewhat disappointed to find that *Souls in the Great Machine* is no more than the first two volumes of that trilogy, *Voices in the Light* and *Mirrorsun Rising* (originally published by Australia's Aphelion Press), lightly rewritten and with a hasty, tacked-on conclusion which might (one hopes) be a slingshot for a further volume.

Well, such are the exigencies of genre publishing (the original novels, like so many sf novels, were themselves fixups of a series of shorter fictions), and if you haven't encountered the truncated trilogy, you're in for a treat. *Souls in the Great Machine* is an unabashed rip-roaring epic, set in Australia a thousand years after war and global warming have destroyed western civilization. Old robotic orbital forts melt the circuits of active electromagnetic machinery with EMP blasts, and steam power is prohibited by religious order, so that civilization must rely upon wind-powered trains and all manner of ingenious clockwork

SOULS IN THE GREAT MACHINE





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devices; a telepathic Call regularly sweeps the land, driving all caught in it to march to the sea; Japanese nanotechnology on the Moon is tardily rebuilding a vast orbital mirror which, originally designed to shade the Earth and reduce the effects of global warming, now threatens to precipitate another ice age.

This last is known only to Zavora Cybeline, a renaissance genius who has designed and built the Calculor, a computer which utilizes enslaved humans as calculating elements (it's reminiscent of the way Richard Feynman organized teams of calculators in Los Alamos during the development of the atomic bomb, but McMullen raises the idea to a higher level and imbues it with such convincing detail that one feels it would actually work). Zavora uses the Calculor to improve the political position of the city state where she's employed as chief librarian, soon becoming its Overmayor, but her main aim is to work out a way to destroy the new Mirrorsun. Another librarian, Lemorel, becomes Zavora's champion (librarians fight duels to settle matters of honour) and then a fearsome warlord; a strange priestess from another civilization beyond the great desert proves, like Zavora, to be resistant to the Call, and helps unravel its mystery. Triangulated by these three strong and intelligent women is Glaston, an attractive but amoral rogue who gradually rises to heroic status despite his worst intentions.

The novel's vast canvas and ironic, omniscient narration are reminiscent of Walter Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz* and Keith Robert's *Pavane*. It is packed with skirmishes and battles, a huge supporting cast, much low comedy, a hidden race of people with bird-like characteristics, war in space, and much else. McMullen is an ambitious writer whose work is permeated with the grand traditions of sf. His epic is slightly flawed by its hasty and somewhat inconclusive ending, which is rather too close to one of the plot devices used by Asimov in his *Foundation* series, but it leaves you wanting more.

Finally, and sadly, the last book to be edited by the late Jim Turner, who championed publication of landmark single-author collections of sf short stories first at Arkham House and then at his own publishing imprint. Robert Reed's *The Dragons of Springplace* (Golden Gryphon, \$23.95) collects eleven stories, first published in either Asimov's *Science Fiction Magazine* or *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, which are straight from sf's heartland, crowded with extraordinary images and unsettling ideas, yet shaded by

dour reservations about sf's relentless optimism and frictionless futures.

Although they deal with classic themes – Earth abandoned to uncomprehending barbarians; vast starships; the incomprehensible behaviour of aliens; immortality – their characters are neither champions nor captains, but ordinary people trying to survive in odd situations. In "Waging Good," a young woman sentenced to work in hospital stations on an Earth decimated by war and terrible plagues returns to the sybaritic society of the Moon determined to wreak a terrible revenge for her exile on former friends who, cushioned by fabulous technologies, can't comprehend the human suffering their victory over Earth has caused. "Stride" transports a runner to an arena where he must outpace an alien predator; Reed, himself a runner, beautifully evokes the rewards and agonies of those who press against their own limitations. In "The Utility Man," an egotistical, too-eager supplicant – in all but name, a fan – is cruelly rejected by an alien mingling with ordinary factory workers. "The Remoras" and "Aeon's Child" are set aboard a planet-sized starship which, filled with human and alien tourists, is circumnavigating the Galaxy; both tally the costs of strange forms of immortality. Reed's black irony is most fully displayed in "The Dragons of Springplace," in which uncomprehending noble savages accidentally cause a strange statue to recite the tale of how an unlikely hero saved the world from a megalomaniac's plan to destroy a waste dump for fissionable material and, incidentally, its strange, genetically-engineered ecology; the tale goes unheeded by those who now inhabit the world bequeathed to them by the hero's sacrifice.

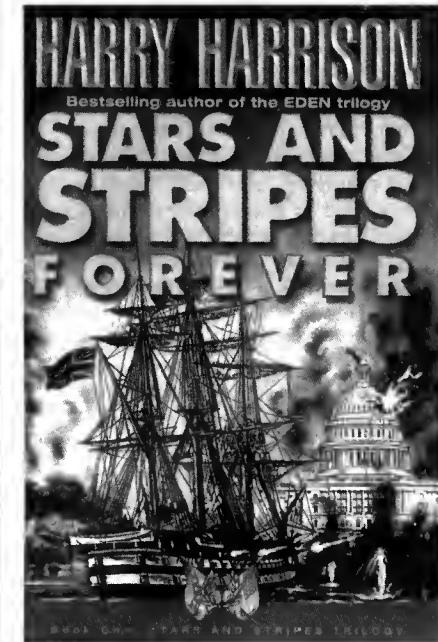
Reed's stories all hint at complex histories and backgrounds beyond their richly detailed yet finely focused narratives, but even the smallest glimpse of these limitless panoramas are grudgingly given, as through a darkly tinted glass. Even the relatively sunny stories, such as the Bradbury-esque "To Church with Mr Multiford," have a dark edge; all explicitly interrogate the tropes which furnish sf, weighing the price of triumphalist heroics, immortality and travel to the stars, and usually finding them wanting. Unlike the use of the classical sf themes by writers who, because of their nationality, must approach sf from the outside, Reed is chipping away at sf's dreamworlds from the inside out, like a worm in a piece of candy eating its way to the freedom of the cold but real world outside.

Paul J. McAuley

War, Who & the Web

Paul Brazier

Anyone who has seen *Gone with the Wind* will remember the scene in the railway yards that begins with Scarlett tending a wounded soldier. The camera pulls back gradually and cranes up to a wide-angle shot where we see acres of wounded, and Scarlett and her patient become one dot in a field of suffering dots. This is an awesome moment, illustrating the mass suffering that constitutes war in contrast with the romance of the story thus far. Since reading Harry Harrison's magnificent *Stars and Stripes Forever* (New English Library, £5.99; Del Rey, \$24.95) I have also seen *Tora! Tora! Tora!* and *The Red Badge of Courage*; and what all these fictions tell me, apart from the fact that Americans don't like getting dragged into war but when they are they fight like tigers, is that war is hell. Not terrifically profound, but how can you convey the huge number of casualties that modern warfare must generate? It is the mechanization of warfare that makes it possible to kill more people, and this has been a theme of Harry Harrison's fiction since the "Deathworld" trilogy (now reissued as *The Deathworld Omnibus*, Orbit, £7.99).





In *Stars and Stripes Forever* Harrison describes the Battle of Shiloh, among others, where 22,000 soldiers were killed. Surely an exaggeration; this is after all an alternate history. But, no, there is an afterword that states this is a simple reporting of facts. The real history that this story is based in is the American civil war; the alternate history part is the consequent war with England. The way Harrison moves his focus in and out is remarkably cinematic in exactly the same way as the *Gone with the Wind* scene. Contrasting close in with overview, he describes the personal experience with the strategic and tactical in amazingly telling detail. Being introduced to a character only to have him killed in the

next paragraph is dispiriting – but then, this is war. If I have one criticism of this book, it is that this style of story-telling is tremendously fragmented; the reader is not meant to follow the progress of a particular character in the style of *The Red Badge of Courage*, which means finally that the war itself is the central character of the book, and I find that as depressing as a news bulletin from Kosovo. But Harrison does it so well. The telling is so vivid that specific scenes linger in the memory in precisely the way cinematic ones do. Which in turn leads to the regret that this is the first book of a trilogy, as it is going to be blessed hard to follow through a drama-documentary of a parallel-universe war. My only other regret is that I have left this fine book so long unreviewed. I plead guilty to negligence *in extremis*, and throw myself on the mercy of the court; I thought I had reviewed it, but overwork robbed me of my good sense and memory. I subject myself to this public humiliation because this book is far too good to be overlooked, for whatever reason.

Harrowing battles and the introduction of technology that changes the way they are fought feature large in *The Iron Wars* (Gollancz, £16.99), the third volume in Paul Kearney's retelling of the history of the Middle Ages in Europe with added magic. Contrary to David Pringle's listing of this in

"Books Received" (IZ 141) as "the final part of the Monarchs of God trilogy," and despite it being rather thin and over a year late, this "Book Three" is very far from being a closure of the story; imagine rather that the final book of the trilogy was delivered not only late but massively over length.

This reviewer suspects that far from fading away from this story, Kearney has delivered an astonishing and uncuttable *magnum opus* that has rather had to be divided up unevenly to make book-length segments.

To recap, the first book, *Hawkwood's Voyage*, recounts the adventurous setting off across the unexplored western ocean of Hawkwood, a soldier of fortune, against a background of the uneasy political situation both within and between the

neighbouring kingdoms and invading hordes from the east. Magic, known as *dweomer* in these books, has been tolerated but is becoming a political football, and in Book Two, *The Heretic Kings*, the dweomer folk are near to wiped out. Thus this episode concentrates more on the establishment of two rival religious leaders that leads to factional in-fighting which in turn further aids the invasion from the east. Unlike Harry Harrison, however, Kearney is very interested in characters, and his story is bound together with the personal histories of various significant characters, from lowly monks to high priests, from foot soldiers to generals, and from werewolf dweomer-folk to kings.

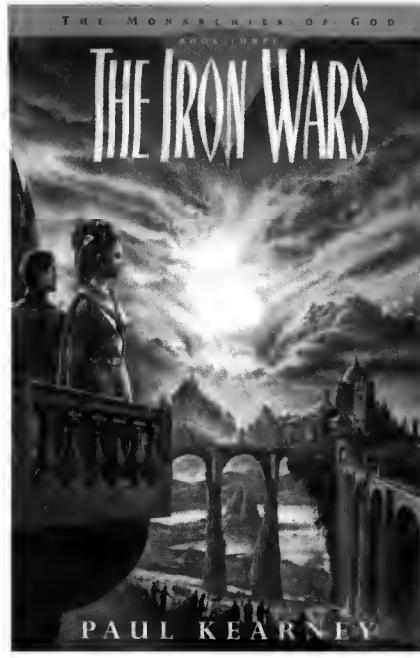
In *The Iron Wars*, we follow mostly the fortunes of a lowly clerical scholar, and of Corfe, one of the few soldiers to escape from the first invasion from the east. Corfe has risen rapidly in rank and continues to do so by virtue of extraordinary feats of arms (he rather resembles the real-life Hawkwood of the Middle Ages, with his invincible heavy cavalry). Both Harrison and Kearney are ex-soldiers who

describe battles and great victories and defeats both at land and at sea in such authoritative terms and captivating prose that they convince utterly. Their great difference is that where Harrison uses the particular to make us feel the overall horror, Kearney uses the overall horror of war to help us better understand his characters. So when at the end of *The Iron Wars* we find most of our characters alive but with their stories unresolved, and indeed, in an epilogue, Hawkwood sailing home alone across the western ocean apparently accompanied by the spirit of the wolf that has informed the entirety of the three books thus far, it seems likely that there must be at least one further volume which will bring this whole fascinating saga to a satisfying close.

These two are great books, so it must seem rather like bathos to turn to a selection from the "Dr Who" and "New Adventures" spinoff lists. But in *Where Angels Fear* (Virgin £5.99), Rebecca Levene and Simon Winstone introduce the New Adventures heroine, Benny Summerfield, to a whole series of pitched battles, up to and including a final battle (it is even named for us – Ragnarok – in case we didn't think it was the end of the world but merely another amusing episode in the life of Professor Benny) on her own home planet of Dellah. Now the thing about Dellah is that there really isn't much there except the University, and that only because a local Sheikh decided there ought to be one, and the upshot of building the University or the spaceport or somesuch is that it rains all the time. In short, the planet is a joke base from which Benny can have her

adventures in time and space. Only this time the threat is real. Lots of old local gods emerge from the wood-work and take over various people and all of a sudden there are pitched battles between people and acolytes, and butchery on a truly awesome scale. And Benny's successful stratagem for dealing with this is to run away, accompanied by lots of gloating evil baddies. Did I say this was not a very good book?

The surprising thing is that the authors, Levene and Winstone, are in fact editors of the series. Or perhaps it's not so surprising. One needs a good editor to keep a story on-line, and





the most basic *hubris* of any editor is to think they can edit themselves. The other books are much better, albeit still a mixed batch. Certainly, it seems that the destruction of Dellah was indeed intended to keep Benny moving in an altogether darker universe than the one she was wont to inhabit, and to sideline her, to an extent. The next book, *The Mary-Sue Extrusion* (Virgin, £5.99) is by Dave Stone, and concerns the search for a missing Benny by a specially-introduced Mister Fix-It character who fades into view from the wallpaper at the beginning of the book watching one of the *Adventures of the New Frontier* starring a recognizable grotesque of Benny, and almost as adroitly fades out again at the end. In the interim, he undertakes various feats of James Bond-like derring do, and reveals his all-too-humble but violent roots in Birmingham in the 21st century. There is actually a good sf adventure somewhere in here, but it is so caked over with knowing post-modern irony that you get fed up looking for it. What, for instance, should we make of this?

I'd love to say that I got out of the detention complex by dint of the courage, resourcefulness and sheer stick-to-it genius that are my watchwords. I'd love to say that, with a mind like a tungsten trap, the eye of a hawk and the perseverance of a minaret-building weevil of Galos XIV, I spotted the fatal flaw of its construction and its infrastructure, bided my time and then, at the propitious moment, via precise and complicated and incredibly heroic means, made my escape.

Reality don't work like that. In reality, I got out by one of those *deus ex machina* events that happen to us every day, but if this were fiction, nobody would believe it for a second. (p. 110)

I'm not sure what this kind of post-midden claptrap is supposed to convey other than the cleverness of its author, but I do know that it does convey a basic lack of confidence that the reader will accept the story at face value, and that attitude will eventually undermine the very audience that is the target for this kind of fiction.

Still darker, and still sidelining the real Benny, the next in the sequence, *Dead Romance* (Virgin, £5.99), is by Lawrence Miles (I'm sure there is a horrible pun in the title, but I can't find it). Again, the Troubles on Dellah are part of the background, but the story takes place almost entirely on Earth. That said, all the events are driven by the troubles on Dellah, and there are some unsettling and convoluted events to do with percep-



tion of self and perception of reality and the way the two intertwine.

Lawrence Miles also wrote *Down and Christmas on a Rational Planet*, and these were both good reads too. But what I felt more than anything else with this book is that he was struggling with the shared-universe stuff, in rather the way a sane man might struggle with a straitjacket.

Again, there is a bloody good sf novel here, but unlike Dave Stone's effort, the tone is spot on all the way through. The book is written in the sprightly, slightly jokey tone of Benny, but the character isn't Benny, and that's uncomfortable. It becomes plain that who she is is a large cause of that discomfort, but we only gradually realize who she is and this slow release of information is one of the major achievements of the book. The other central character is another erstwhile Who companion, Chris Cwej, but I only recognized his name: his character was completely different. I like reading the "New Adventures" because they are not too demanding and they pass the time and occasionally something really good comes out. I found Paul Cornell and Kate Orman through the series, and now I am beginning to think that Lawrence Miles is another such discovery. And like Paul and Kate, it's about time he started writing his own books.

I mentioned in my review of Kate



Orman's *Walking to Babylon* (IZ 130) how chillingly she invokes a dyson-sphere-inhabiting civilization called The People. Ruled by an AI called God who uses an ex-ship intelligence with amnesia reincarnated in the form of an angel called Clarence to communicate with Benny, The People are a major background player in all the Dellah series of stories. In *Tears of the Oracle* (Virgin, £5.99) (unfortunately, the design on the cover makes it look like a book called *Tears of Treacle*), the latest of the series, Justin Richards brings Benny back centre stage, along with Clarence and one or two other characters from previous stories. And, yes, we are back in New Adventures-land with a vengeance. There is nothing challenging about this book. It is a Ten-Little-Indians archaeological romp with a certain amount of self-doubt and self-pity for Benny. People do heroic things and people die horribly, and the serial killer and the truth are duly revealed, and Benny doesn't stuff up quite as badly as she thought. I enjoyed this book simply as an undemanding romp; I didn't like *The Mary-Sue Extrusion* for its involuted knowingness, although I am sure there are people who would admire the skill with which it is carried off; and I enjoyed *Dead Romance* a lot because it made me reconsider solipsism all over again. If there is one thing I do like, it is variety in my diet, and those people at Virgin Books certainly seem to be supplying that.

Earlier books in the series include *Another Girl, Another Planet* by Martin Day and Len Beech, which I really enjoyed but couldn't find time to write about properly, and *Tempest* (£5.99) by Christopher Bulis. The latter is a straightforward locked-train murder mystery, with strong overtones of Alistair Maclean and Agatha Christie, that hardly needs to be set on another planet, nevermind with aliens aboard. But Bulis also includes in his stories logical puzzles that you can attempt to solve if you choose. Now I have never been able to stand such things, so I was rather surprised to find myself enjoying not only this book, but also his two Dr Who novels, *Vanderdeken's Children* and *The Ultimate Treasure* (BBC Books, £4.99 each). It has to be said that the second is a rather silly maze puzzle that three competing teams have to solve, not dissimilar to *The Crystal Maze* on TV and thus hardly worthy of the attention of a Time Lord. As usual with Dr Who books, the best bits don't have the



REVIEWED

Doctor in at all, and there is some rather splendid character-building here that seems totally out of place, but very welcome. *Vanderdeken's Children* is actually a very similar story, but this time the maze is a huge alien spaceship that seems to be partly stuck in another dimension. Again, there are overt puzzles for the reader to solve, as well as the greater puzzle of the ship itself, and a stunningly good climax. I was reminded of the computer game *Marathon* except that there aren't so many monsters to shoot.

Another Dr Who book of note is *Seeing I* (BBC, £4.99) by Kate Orman and Jonathan Blum. This is a rip-roaring adventure of the old school, where the science fiction is solidly part of the story and so is the Doctor. There are lots of puns as you would expect with this kind of title, but there is a serious undercurrent of real meaning which has come to be expected from Kate Orman. If you can bear the tiny type, buy this book and see what I mean.

Moving to even younger adults, in 1997 Orion Children's Books and Dolphin paperbacks began publishing a series of short novels by well-known writers of the fantastic under the generic title "The Web." The first six have now been collected together into a single volume, *The Web 2027* (Millennium, £5.99). Collected between these covers are stories by Stephen Baxter, Stephen Bowkett, Eric Brown, Graham Joyce, Peter F. Hamilton and Maggie Furey, although, strange to say, nowhere do the publishers mention that these books were first published for young adults. Perhaps they think the omnibus will sell solely on the strength of the authors' names.

That would be a shame, because, while none of these stories are bad, some of the authors do undershoot the right tone for the target audience, and a more adult audience might wonder what on earth they have got. It would be invidious to rank all the stories here, but the best is Graham Joyce's *Spiderbite* – by a short head.

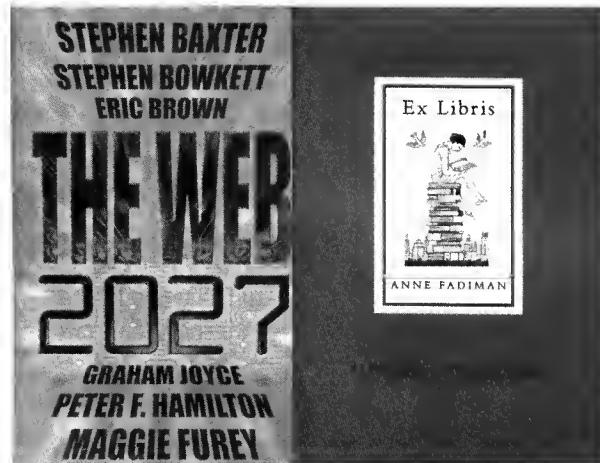
Newer books in the series continue with Stephen Baxter's *Weberash* (Dolphin, £3.50), where aliens move into the Net and cause it all to crash, and one young woman trapped inside the net has to help Vikings build a space rocket from local materials to put



ERIC BROWN PAT CADIGAN
WALKABOUT AVATAR

things to rights. Tremendous fun. Maggie Furey returns with *Spindrift*, where the bad witch from *Sorceress* is to some extent rehabilitated. New recruits are James Lovegrove with *Computopia* (try swimming with virtual sharks that can bite) and Ken Macleod with his wonderful *Cydonia*.

In *Untouchables* in the first series, Eric Brown examined the plight of the Indian underclasses and the way such class structure is stripped away in the Web. He returns with *Walkabout*, with much the same political agenda but this time with an Aboriginal girl who gets to play football for Australia, but whose uncle is taken away by



Men in Black – read the book!

The gem of the series thus far is undoubtedly Pat Cadigan's *Avatar*. Where the other stories go some way towards levelling out social differences and allowing adventures, and most of their action takes place within the Web, only occasionally spilling over into reality, Cadigan takes the entire postulated universe and produces a story that is a seamless whole. Taking a boy who has an accident that paralyses him completely, she makes him a part of a quasi-Amish community that eschews all unnecessary technology, and then explores both his and his community's dilemmas as he finds that the only way he can experience the world is via the frowned-upon technology. If you only read one of this series, read this one. Then read the others.

And finally, in best Trevor McDonald mode, a piece of complete irrelevance to those interested in fantastic fiction – but nevertheless of central interest to the majority of *Interzone*'s readers. In *Ex Libris* (Allen Lane, £9.99), Anne Fadiman describes in succinct and yet telling detail what is essentially the character of nearly everyone I know within the sf world, and many outside it too – the bibliomane.

I remember some years ago a couple known as Joan and Tibs declaring that they had merged their book collections. I thought this a rather quaint method of declaring that they were an item at the time, but Fadiman describes in her first essay how, having known her husband for ten years, and been married to him for five, they had finally decided to mingle their books. The process is described in detail that would not shame some of the schlockier horror novels that occasionally come our way – but it rings true. I have to admit

that having been with my wife for near to fifteen years, we still maintain separate libraries, and neither of us can countenance this ultimate of intimacies, so the essay seems perfectly realistic.

"Never do that to a book," "Words on a Flyleaf," and "The Literary Glutton" give an idea of the flavour of further pieces. To be recommending a book of essays is strange enough nowadays, but a book of essays on owning books... Allen Lane are to be congratulated on producing it. And every bibliomane reading this will love both its contents and its form. Enjoy.

Paul Brazier

BOOKS RECEIVED



MAY
1999

Alderman, Gill. **Lilith's Castle**. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648272-4, 389pp, A-format paperback, cover by Bill Gregory, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; a fourth novel by this Irish-resident British author; there's no clear indication as to whether or not it is a sequel to her previous book, *The Memory Palace* [1996], but it has a similar feel to it.) 7th June 1999.

Anthony, Patricia. **Flanders: A Novel**. Black Swan, ISBN 0-552-99820-6, 413pp. B-format paperback, £6.99. (Historical fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1998; this is the first UK edition, and it's not labelled fantasy in any way; it's set on the Western Front, during World War I; reviewed by David Mathew in *Interzone* 135; see also the interview with Patricia Anthony in *Iz* 144.) 10th June 1999.

Atkinson, Austen. **Impact Earth: Asteroids, Comets and Meteoroids – The Growing Threat**. Foreword by Dr Brian Marsden. Virgin, ISBN 1-85227-789-0, xxxiii+266pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Popular science text, first edition; it seems to sensationalize its admittedly alarming subject to a greater degree than did John Gribbin's similar book, *Fire on Earth* [1996].) 20th May 1999.

Banks, Iain. **The Business**. Little Brown, ISBN 0-316-64844-2, 393pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Marginally-sf mainstream novel, first edition; proof copy received; although the publishers describe it as "a modern, fast-paced comedy-thriller," this also appears to be a "fantasy of history" [in the John Clute/Encyclopedia of Fantasy sense of

the term], involving as it does the Business, "a powerful and massively discreet trans-global organization whose origins predate the Christian Church.") 12th August 1999.

Banks, Iain M. **Inversions**. Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-763-3, 405pp, B-format paperback, cover by Mark Salwowski, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1998; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 133.) 3rd June 1999.

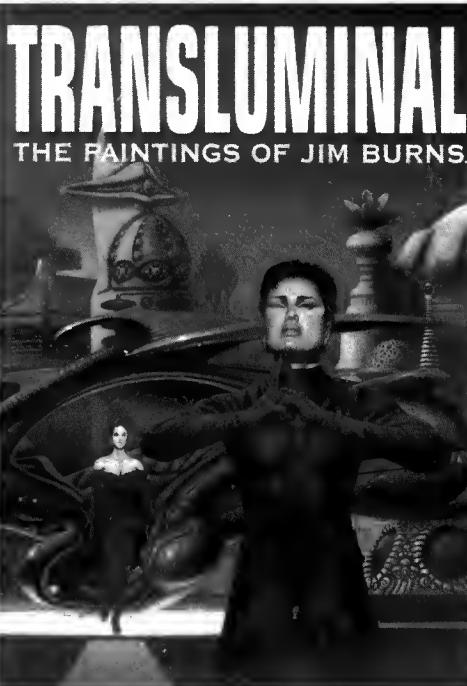
Baxter, Stephen. **Time: Manifold 1**. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-225768-8, 456pp, hardcover, £17.99. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; a new big one from Baxter, and the first of a trilogy, the publishers are billing it as "the millennium's last great sf novel.") 2nd August 1999.

Bonansinga, Jay R. **Head Case**. Pan, ISBN 0-330-34724-1, 373pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first published in the USA [?], 1998; the author's fourth book; apparently there was a Macmillan hardcover of this one last year, but we didn't see it.) 11th June 1999.

Borchardt, Alice. **The Silver Wolf**. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-224715-1, 451pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (Historical horror/romantic novel, first published in the USA, 1998; a werewolf tale set at the time of Charlemagne, it's by Anne Rice's sister – not that the UK publishers seem keen to give that fact away [as the US publishers did] on the book itself, even though they quote an Anne Rice endorsement.) 21st June 1999.

Bova, Ben. **Return to Mars**. Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-70795-X, viii+548pp, hardcover, cover by Mark Harrison, £16.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA [?], 1999; sequel to *Mars* [1992].) 17th June 1999.

Burns, Jim. **Transluminal: The Paintings of Jim Burns**. Paper Tiger, ISBN 1-85585-



678-6, 112pp, very large-format paperback, cover by Burns, £14.99. (Sf art portfolio; first edition; a gathering of very skilfully rendered book covers by Britain's leading sf artist; a number have been re-used over the years as *Interzone* covers; the text is largely by Jim Burns himself, and a pleasingly unbuttoned and "honest" text it is too, but there are short introductions to various chapters by well-known sf writers – Greg Bear, David Brin, Colin Greenland, Peter F. Hamilton, Paul J. McAuley, Ian McDonald and others; highly recommended.) 22nd July 1999.

Card, Orson Scott. **Ender's Shadow**. "A parallel novel to *Ender's Game*." Tor, ISBN 0-312-86860-X, 380pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; a retake on the author's Hugo-winning success of 1985, *Ender's Game*; this is Card's second substantial new novel in the space of six months [the other was the fantasy *Enchantment*, from Del Rey]: he'd better watch out in case people start mistaking him for Harry Turtledove.) September 1999.

Card, Orson Scott. **Heartfire: The Tales of Alvin Maker, V**. Tor, ISBN 0-812-50924-2, 336pp, A-format paperback, cover by Dennis Nolan, \$6.95. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1998; reviewed by Brian Stableford in *Interzone* 134; the fifth volume in what is widely perceived as Card's best series, following *Seventh Son* [1987], *Red Prophet* [1988], *Prentice Alvin* [1989] and *Alvin Journeyman* [1995]; have there been no British editions of this book and the last? – that's a surprise.) May 1999.

Chippindale, Peter. **Laptop of the Gods: A Millennial Fable**. Pocket, ISBN 0-671-85568-9, 420pp, B-format paperback, cover by Stephen Player, £6.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first published in 1998; born 1945, Chippindale is a British journalist who has written many non-fiction books as well as an earlier novel, *Mink*; reviewed by David Mathew in *Interzone* 143.) 14th June 1999.

Conrad, Joseph, and Ford Madox Ford. **The Inheritors: An Extravagant Story**. Foreword by George Hay. Introduction by David Seed. "Liverpool Science Fiction Texts and Studies, 8." Liverpool University Press, ISBN 0-85323-560-0, xxviii+164pp, hardcover, £14.95. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 1901; at the time of first publication the co-author was known as Ford Madox Hueffer [he changed his Germanic-sounding name during World War I]; the great Joseph Conrad's only foray into sf is a curious book about the intrusion into present-day reality of mysterious people from "the fourth dimension" [i.e., in effect, the future]; in fact, it was more the brainchild of Hueffer/Ford [who later wrote another Wellsian fantasy, *Mr Apollo* (1908)] than of Conrad himself; not a major success, but worth reading; this



edition also contains ten pages of appendices reprinting contemporary reviews, extracts from the authors' letters, etc.)
Late entry: March publication, received in May 1999.

DuBois, Brendan. **Resurrection Day**. Little Brown, ISBN 0-316-64645-8, 389pp, hardcover, £10. (Alternate-world sf thriller, first published in the USA, 1999; proof copy received; the action opens in a post-nuclear 1972, the premise being that the bombs did fall as a result of the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962; another one for the mainstream market, it is being compared to Robert Harris's bestseller *Fatherland*.) 5th August 1999.

Egan, Greg. **Teranesia**. Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-574-5, 249pp, hardcover, no price shown. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; there may be a simultaneous C-format paperback edition [not seen]; a fairly compact-seeming new novel from one of the world's best sf writers, set in the Pacific region in the future.) August 1999.

Farland, David. **Brotherhood of the Wolf**. "The Runelords." Tor, ISBN 0-312-86742-5, 480pp, hardcover, cover by Darrell K. Sweet, \$26.95. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 1999; the British edition carried the subtitle "Book 2 of The Runelords"; "David Farland" is a pseudonym of sf novelist Dave Wolverton.) 27th May 1999.

Gemmell, David A. **Midnight Falcon**. "A Novel of the Rigante." Bantam Press, ISBN 0-593-03722-7, 404pp, hardcover, cover by John Bolton, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; follow-up to *Sword in the Storm*, in Gemmell's new Celtic-flavoured series.) 10th June 1999.

Gemmell, David A. **Sword in the Storm**. "Book One in the Rigante series." Corgi, ISBN 0-552-14256-5, 478pp, A-format paperback, cover by John Howe, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1998.) 10th June 1999.

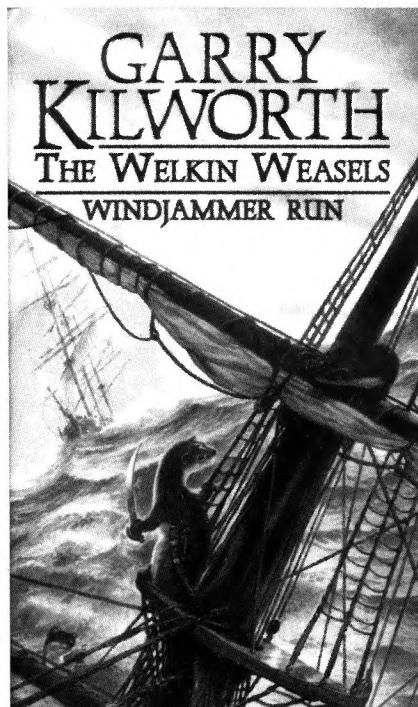
Hartwell, David G., ed. **Year's Best SF 4**. HarperPrism, ISBN 0-06-105902-1, xi+484pp, A-format paperback, cover by John Harris, \$6.50. (Sf anthology, first edition; it's the first of this series we have seen – smaller than Gardner Dozois's better-known rival series [but still substantial], its fairly brief editorial introduction makes much play of the fact that "this book is full of science fiction – every story in the book is clearly that and not something else" [i.e. no horror, fantasy, "slipstream," etc]; it contains 20 stories selected from 1998's output, by Gregory Benford, David Brin, Ted Chiang, Mark S. Geston, Ron Goulart, Alexander Jablokov, Nancy Kress, David Langford, Robert Reed, Mary Rosenblum, Norman Spinrad, Bruce Sterling, Michael Swanwick and others; no less than four of the stories are from *Interzone* – "The Day Before They Came" by Mary Soon Lee,



"The Twelfth Album" by Stephen Baxter, "Unravelling the Thread" by Jean-Claude Dunyach and "The Thing Over There" by Dominic Green; recommended.) June 1999.

Herniman, Marcus. **The Siege of Arrandin**. "Book One of the Arrandin Trilogy." Earthlight, 0-671-02189-3, 519pp, A-format paperback, cover by Geoff Taylor, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; a debut book by a new British writer.) July 1999.

Hutson, Sean. **Warhol's Prophecy**. Macmillan, ISBN 0-333-73599-4, ix+447pp, hardcover, £12.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first edition; the prophecy alluded to in the title is of course Andy Warhol's remark that in the future "everyone will be famous for 15 minutes" – which usually,



these days, seems to be taken as some kind of licence for assassins or serial killers; the sensational and gory Mr Hutson has followed in fellow bestseller James Herbert's footsteps by switching to a new publisher, Macmillan [the Scottish evangelical founders of which august firm, publishers of *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, *The Water-Babies* and *Alice in Wonderland*, and forefathers of a Prime Minister, are no doubt spinning in their graves].) 9th July 1999.

Kilworth, Garry. **Windjammer Run: Book Three of The Welkin Weasels**. Corgi, ISBN 0-552-54548-1, 413pp, A-format paperback, cover by John Howe, £4.99. (Juvenile animal fantasy novel, first edition; conclusion of a trilogy.) June 1999.

King, Stephen. **Bag of Bones**. New English Library, ISBN 0-340-71820-X, 660pp, A-format paperback, cover by Larry Rostant, £6.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first published in the USA, 1998; reviewed by Peter Crowther in *Interzone* 137.) 17th June 1999.

King, Stephen. **Hearts in Atlantis**. Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-73890-1, 499pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Horror/mainstream novel, first published in the USA, 1999; proof copy received; this is King's big new "1960s" novel – i.e. one which deals primarily with the events of that now long-gone decade, especially the Vietnam War; it possibly has some hidden science-fictional elements, and certainly there are lots of references to sf novels and movies which the young protagonist reads or sees.) 2nd September 1999.

McCaffrey, Anne. **The Tower and the Hive**. Bantam Press, ISBN 0-593-04324-3, viii+296pp, hardcover, cover by Duane O. Myers, £16.99. (Sf novel, first edition [?]; fifth and last volume in the "Damia" series [now officially called the "Tower and the Hive" series] – *The Rowon* [1990], *Damio* [1991], *Domio's Children* [1992] and *Lyon's Pride* [1994].) 10th June 1999.

McCaffrey, Anne, and Margaret Ball. **Acorna's Quest**. "The Adventures of the Unicorn Girl." Corgi, ISBN 0-552-14748-6, 411pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fred Gambino, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1998; this is probably a share-crop – i.e. written by Ball with McCaffrey's indulgence.) 8th July 1999.

May, Julian. **Orion Arm: An Adventure of the Rampart Worlds**. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-224624-4, 364pp, hardcover, cover by Stephen Bradbury, £16.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA [?], 1999; the subtitle on the cover reads "The Rampart Worlds: Book 2.") 21st June 1999.

Modesitt, L. E., Jr. **The White Order**. Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-843-5, 566pp, A-format paperback, cover by Darrell K. Sweet, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the



USA, 1998; the eighth "Recluse" novel.)
10th June 1999.

Pratchett, Terry, Ian Stewart and Jack Cohen. **The Science of Discworld**. Ebury Press, ISBN 0-09-186515-8, 336pp, hardcover, cover by Paul Kidby, £14.99. (Popular science text, based on the "Discworld" series of fantasies by Pratchett; first edition; the book is embedded in a humorous fictional frame, presumably written by Pratchett, but the bulk of the chapters consist of fairly lightly-handled mathematical and scientific exposition, presumably by the well-qualified Messrs Stewart and Cohen; it looks like fun.) 1st June 1999.

Rankin, Robert. **Apocalypso**. Corgi, ISBN 0-552-14589-0, 365pp, A-format paperback, cover by John Alexander, £5.99. (Humorous sf/fantasy novel, first published in 1998; we didn't see the hardcover edition.) Moy (?) 1999.

Rankin, Robert. **Snuff Fiction**. Doubleday, ISBN 0-385-40944-3, 257pp, hardcover, cover by John Alexander, £16.99. (Humorous sf/fantasy novel, first edition; this is the first Rankin we have been sent in while – we missed his last year's output; according to the blurb, it "chronicles the collapse of civilization, as the world slides into chaos with a smile on its face and a finger up its nose.") Moy (?) 1999.

Robson, Justina. **Silver Screen**. Macmillan, ISBN 0-333-75437-9, 374pp, trade paperback, £9.99. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; a debut novel by a new Leeds-based British author who, one would guess from the acknowledgements page, has been published previously in Andy Cox's small-press magazine *The Third Alternative*; it's amusing to note that the ancient and honourable house of Macmillan [see comments under Sean Hutson, above] now describe themselves, for the sake of sf fans at any rate, as "the publishers of Peter F. Hamilton.") 13th August 1999.

Royle, Nicholas, ed. **The Time Out Book of Paris Short Stories**. Penguin, ISBN 0-14-028121-5, xiv+194pp, B-format paperback, £6.99. (Mainstream anthology with some fantastic content; first edition; third in a series which Royle has edited on behalf of *Time Out* magazine, it follows *The Time Out Book of London Short Stories* and *The Time Out Book of New York Short Stories* [neither of which we saw]; like both the previous volumes it contains some original stories by authors associated with the sf and fantasy fields – in this case Kim Newman and Christopher Kenworthy [the latter's story, "The Wishbone Bag," is the longest item in the book]; other contributors include Michel Butor, Maureen Freely, Ismail Kadare, Toby Litt, Michele Roberts and Adam Thorpe, among others.) No date shown: received in Moy 1999.

Scott, Martin. **Thraxas at the Races**. Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-734-X, 245pp, A-format paperback, cover by Julian Gibson, £5.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition; a third novel by this new [?] British writer, following hard on the heels of his first two, *Throxos* and *Throxos and the Warrior Monks* [both 1999].) 3rd June 1999.

Silverberg, Robert, ed. **Far Horizons: All New Tales from the Greatest Worlds of Science Fiction**. Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-942-3, 482pp, hardcover, cover by Fred Gambino, £17.99. (Sf anthology, first published in the USA [?], 1999; all-original stories, each set in one of its creator's best-known universes, by Greg Bear, Gregory Benford, David Brin, Orson Scott Card, Joe Haldeman, Ursula Le Guin, Nancy Kress, Anne McCaffrey, Frederik Pohl and Dan Simmons – plus a story by Silverberg himself, in his "Roma Eterna" series.) Moy (?) 1999.

Silverberg, Robert, ed. **Legends**. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-225667-3, xiii+591pp, C-format paperback, covers [front and back] by Geoff Taylor and Josh Kirby, £11.99. (Fantasy anthology, first published in the USA, 1998; all-original stories, each set in its creator's best-known world, by some of the most commercially-successful fantasy authors of recent years: Orson Scott Card, Raymond E. Feist, Terry Goodkind, Robert Jordan, Stephen King, Ursula Le Guin, Anne McCaffrey, George R. R. Martin, Terry Pratchett and Tad Williams – plus a story by Silverberg himself, set in his "Majipoor" world; reviewed by David Mathew in *Interzone* 139.) 7th June 1999.

Stephenson, Neal. **Cryptonomicon**. Avon, ISBN 0-380-97346-4, 918pp, hardcover, cover by Liz Kenyon, \$27.50. (Sf novel, first edition; by the author of *Snow Crash* and *The Diamond Age*; good grief – we've seen plenty of Big Commercial Fan-

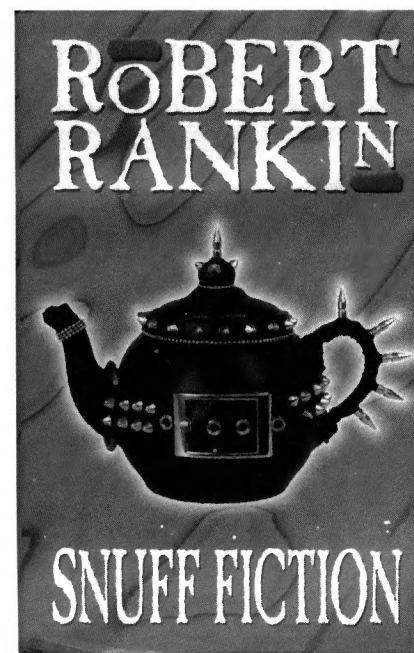
tasy tomes of this sort of heft, but what is one to make of a "literary sf" novel which contains nearly 1,000 pages of smallish print?; and it's only the "first volume in what promises to be an epoch-making masterpiece" [states the blurb].) 4th Moy 1999.

Tarr, Judith, and Harry Turtledove. **Household Gods**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86487-6, 508pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Sf/fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; by two historically well-informed authors, it appears to be a fairly straight tale of a modern-day woman who is cast back in time to experience the joys and horrors of life in the Roman Empire; according to the blurb, it's "in the great tradition of novels like Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*"; a brief acknowledgment note states that it's based on an idea by the late Fletcher Pratt [1897-1956].) September 1999.

Tubb, E. C. **Death God's Doom: The First Chronicle of Malkar**. Cosmos Books [32 Tynedale Ave., Wallsend, Tyne & Wear NE28 9LS], ISBN 0-9668968-0-7, 127pp, small-press paperback, cover by Ron Turner, £6. (Fantasy novel, first edition; apparently veteran British writer Ted Tubb wrote short stories about his sword-and-sorcery hero Malkar many decades ago; it's not made clear whether or not this book incorporates any of that old material, but it's described as the "first long-awaited Malkar novel"; a follow-up, *The Sleeping City: The Second Chronicle of Molkor*, is promised; the publisher here is Philip Harbottle, and the book is quite nicely produced, better-made than the similar but more expensive small-press volumes put out by Harbottle's American friend Gary Lovisi of Gryphon Books [see below, under Williamson].) Late entry: Morth publication, received in Moy 1999.

Watt-Evans, Lawrence. **Dragon Weather**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86978-9, 480pp, hardcover, cover by Bob Eggleton, \$25.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received.) October 1999.

Williamson, Jack. **The Ruler of Fate, and Xandulu: Two Classic SF Novels**. Introduction by Philip Harbottle. "Gryphon Science Fiction Rediscovery Series, #29." Gryphon [PO Box 209, Brooklyn, NY 11228-0209, USA], ISBN 1-58250-017-7, 161pp, small-press paperback, cover by Ron Turner, \$20. (Sf novella collection, first edition; two early, unpublished-in-book-form, short novels by sf's oldest working writer; "The Ruler of Fate" is from *Weird Tales*, April-June 1936, and "Xandulu" is from *Wonder Stories*, March-May 1934; as we've stated before, speaking of an earlier Williamson collection from Gryphon Books, these are very old, very pulpy works, but it's nice to have them available once more.) Moy 1999.



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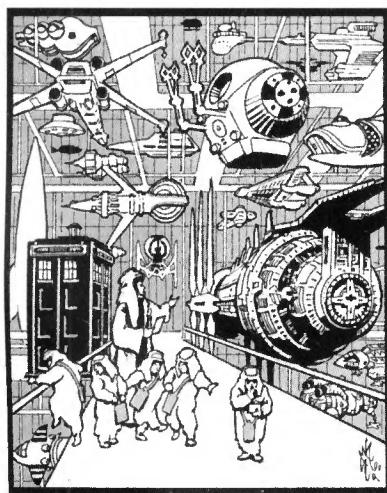
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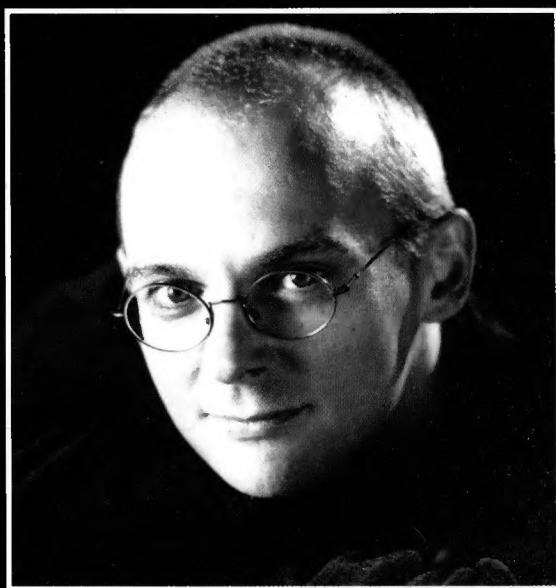
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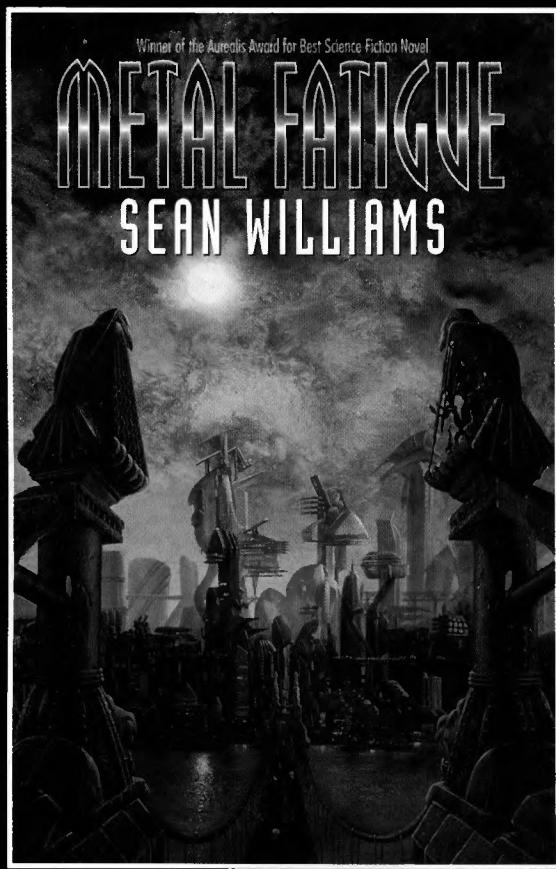
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